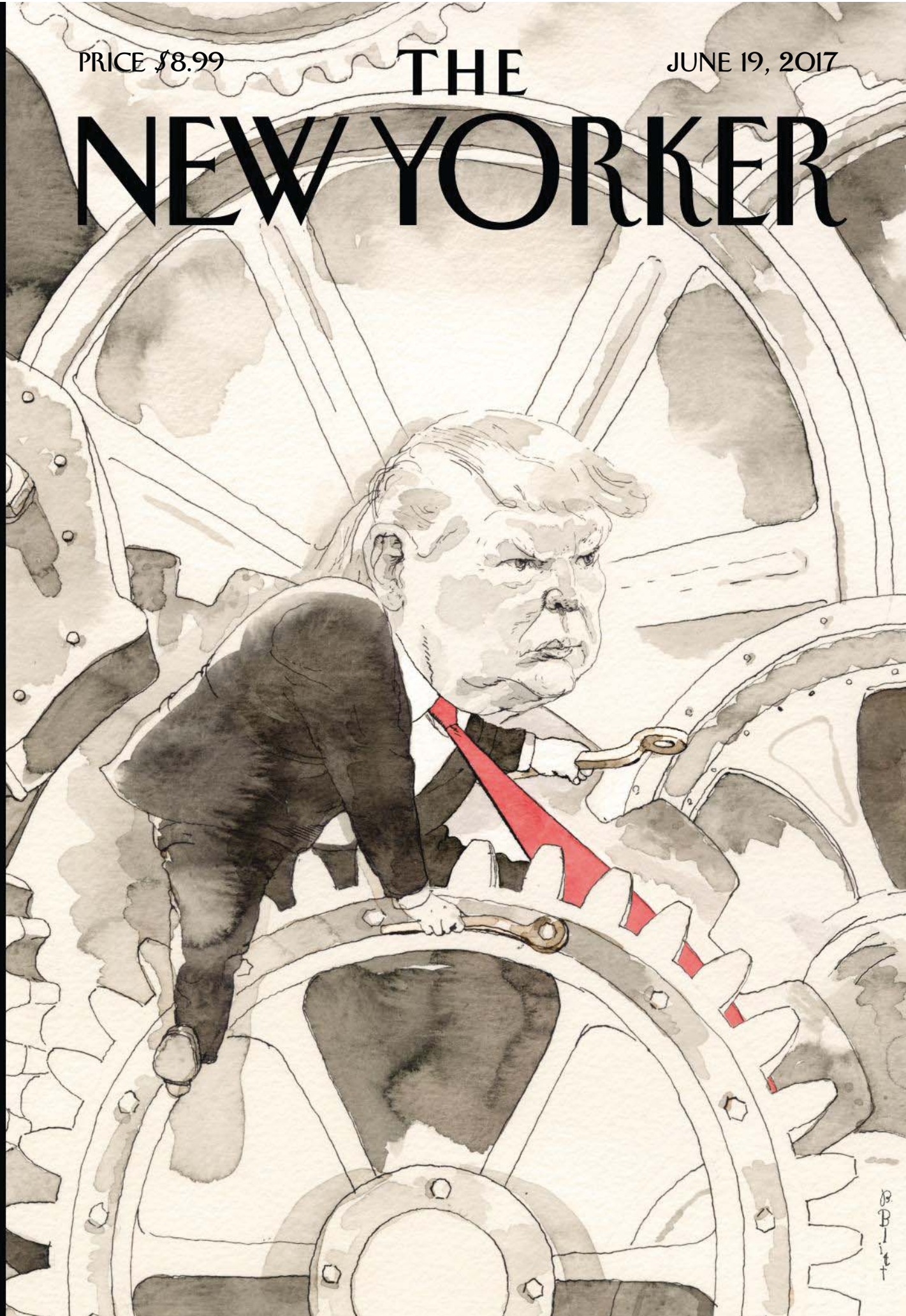


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JUNE 19, 2017

# THE NEW YORKER



B. Blitt

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4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

19 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

*Amy Davidson on James Comey's testimony;  
Confederate memorials in Brooklyn; "War Machine";  
Michel Houellebecq at home; James Turrell.*

ANNALS OF CULTURE

**Stephen Greenblatt** 24 The Invention of Sex  
*How St. Augustine spoiled all the fun.*

SHOUTS & MURMURS

**Paul Rudnick** 29 Jared & Ivanka's Guide to Mindful Marriage

PERSONAL HISTORY

**David Sedaris** 30 Why Aren't You Laughing?  
*My mother, drunk or sober.*

A REPORTER AT LARGE

**Rachel Aviv** 36 Memories of a Murder  
*An investigation and its aftermath.*

COMIC STRIP

**Liana Finck** 40 "Manspreaders of the Year"

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

**Zadie Smith** 48 A Bird of Few Words  
*The portraits of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.*

FICTION

**Andrew Sean Greer** 54 "It's a Summer Day"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

**Ian Buruma** 61 *How much of a threat is China?*  
64 Briefly Noted

A CRITIC AT LARGE

**Kelefa Sanneh** 67 *A history of prog rock.*

DANCING

**Joan Acocella** 72 *"Whipped Cream" at A.B.T.*

THE CURRENT CINEMA

**Anthony Lane** 74 *"I, Daniel Blake," "Beatriz at Dinner."*

POEMS

**Ilyse Kusnetz** 42 "How to Build a Stradivarius"  
**José Antonio Rodríguez** 56 "La Migra"

COVER

**Barry Blitt** "Modern Times"

---

**DRAWINGS** Farley Katz, Christopher Weyant, Drew Dernavich, Emily Flake, John McNamee, Joe Dator,  
P. C. Vey, Edward Steed, Benjamin Schwartz, William Haefeli **SPOTS** Guido Scarabottolo



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**Kelefa Sanneh** (*Books*, p. 67) is a staff writer.

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### PODCAST

David Grann on James Comey's threat to the Trump Presidency and the controversial history of the F.B.I.



### PHOTO BOOTH

Michael Schulman on Brigitte Lacombe's behind-the-scenes photos of iconic theatre performances.

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RIGHT: BRIGITTE LACOMBE

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# THE MAIL

## FIGHTING THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Margaret Talbot's article on heroin addiction in West Virginia brings the national opioid epidemic to life for readers, but I question some of the terms she uses to describe her subjects ("The Addicts Next Door," June 5th & 12th). Studies show that when patients are described as "addicts"—a term that identifies people by their actions—rather than as having a "substance-use disorder," they receive more blame from their health-care providers, and less treatment. Addiction is a chronic disease. Until we change the way that we talk about people who suffer from addiction, those struggling with the disease will continue dying in the shadows cast by our stigmatizing language.

*Shayla Partridge*  
*Cambridge, Mass.*

Talbot's article describes West Virginians' efforts to treat drug addiction by different means, including detox centers and out-of-state twenty-eight-day programs. It's worth noting that abstinence-based treatments are not generally the most effective way to treat opioid addiction. Some studies show that the overdose death rate after twenty-eight-day abstinence programs is higher than that seen in active heroin addiction. By contrast, taking a maintenance medication such as methadone or buprenorphine for an extended period, or indefinitely—as one woman who is mentioned at the end of the article does—is effective and much less costly than inpatient treatment. We need to focus on long-term symptom management, not just on patching people up and sending them back out into the same environment.

*Minu Aghevli, Ph.D.*  
*Baltimore, Md.*

As a resident physician training at Dartmouth—whose hospital is the primary referral center for New Hampshire, which has the second-highest

overdose death rate in the country, after West Virginia—I agree with one of the women Talbot interviews when she says that hospitals "really can't help." Patients whose overdoses are reversed with naloxone are often discharged from local hospitals shortly after their arrival and do not make it to tertiary centers such as the one where I train. However, at least once a week a patient arrives with a potentially lethal infection resulting from using dirty needles. I routinely order diagnostic testing and antibiotics for these patients, and arrange for risky and expensive surgeries, but often they end up dying from subsequent drug use. It is far more difficult for me to connect vulnerable patients to the resources and the therapies they need to treat their underlying addiction. The lack of these services, rather than the failure of the best medical and surgical care available, is what ultimately kills them.

*Richard Saunders*  
*Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center*  
*White River Junction, Vt.*

Talbot highlights many of the causes driving America's opioid epidemic, such as the purposelessness that accompanies economic exclusion and the spiritual crisis of "life's confounding open-endedness," but most of the solutions mentioned in the article—increased access to detox and rehab, greater availability of naloxone and Suboxone—treat only the symptoms. The most obvious measure—New Deal-type direct job creation—remains taboo for legislators. Perhaps the real story here is about the consequences of conservatism's victory in the battle of ideas.

*David Avruch*  
*Baltimore, Md.*

•

*Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.*





JUNE 14 - 20, 2017

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



In the mid-sixties, when smart technology was the stuff of sci-fi, the British collective Archigram drew up plans for “Walking City,” a utopian metropolis in which people would live in roaming pods, docking at charging stations as needed. The Croatian artist Dora Budor pays homage to the project in her sculpture “The Forecast (New York Situations),” pictured above, which is part of the High Line’s open-air exhibition “**Mutations.**” Budor’s piece has a mutant twist of its own: in the rain, the pods change color.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WARD ROBERTS



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# ART

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## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Metropolitan Museum

"Irving Penn: Centennial"

The American photographer, whose twin talents for dynamic portraiture and spartan still-lives dove-tail beautifully in his fashion work, is perhaps most renowned for his six decades of contributions to *Vogue*. Penn, who died in 2009, shot a hundred and sixty-five covers for the magazine, including the very famous image, from 1950, of Jean Patchett in a wide-brimmed hat with a net veil. In the high-contrast, boldly geometric shot, the model's hands-on-hips stance and sidelong glance lend her a mischievous and distinctly modern character. This extensive retrospective shows all aspects of Penn's keen approach to his medium. A suite of portraits, from 1947-48, demonstrates his reputation-establishing trick of cornering his subjects—a brooding Capote, a commanding Schiaparelli, an impassive Joe Louis—with the use of angled stage flats. While the photographer was, without fail, technically virtuosic, he was not conceptually impeccable. The hagiographic wall text touts his series of female nudes, from 1949-50, as images shot "without a lens of fashion or prudery," but the cropped compositions of white torsos are, in fact, paragons of sanitized formalism. Penn was at his best when capturing fashion's striking sculptural volumes—a Balenciaga sleeve or Issey Miyake staircase pleats—and the personalities of the people who brought them to life. *Through July 30.*

### MOMA PS1

"Ian Cheng: Emissaries"

What if a work of art was so smart that it could free itself from the artist who made it? The digital whiz Cheng takes on that question in a trio of color projections, which he describes as "video games that play themselves." These simulations are set millennia apart in the same landscape, which evolves from volcano to lake to atoll. (Politically minded viewers might grok a cautionary climate-change tale.) The characters start out shamanic and end up sci-fi. They include, by time line, a prophetic owl and the plucky daughter of a village elder (a prehistoric Arya Stark), a pack of Shiba Inus and an undead celebrity (a skeleton with sunglasses intact), and a meerkat-like race of futurist ranchers. Activity unfolds in real time according to rules programmed by Cheng and his collaborators, but, as in life, rules do not control outcome. The compassion of Cheng's transhumanist vision aligns him with a cohort of other young artists working in New York, staying awake as they dream of the future. *Through Sept. 25.*

### Brooklyn Museum

"We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85"

In this superlative survey, familiar names mingle with those that deserve much more recognition. The several dozen black women artists whose work is featured did not conform to one style, but they did share urgent concerns, often addressing issues of bias and exclusion in their art—and in their art-world organizing. Senga Nengudi used her remarkable, corporeal abstract sculptures, made from stuffed panty hose, as elements of her performance art, captured in haunting photographs, which are

contextualized by correspondence detailing her affiliation with Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM), a crucial New York institution of the black avant-garde, instrumental to the careers of a number of the artists here. Lorraine O'Grady is one of them: her sardonic "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Costume," a pageant gown made of countless white gloves, which she wore to exhibition openings in her iconic guerrilla performances of 1980-83, is wonderful to encounter. Painting is well represented by dense, textured color-field marvels by Howardena Pindell, from the seventies, which are placed in quiet dialogue with Virginia Jaramillo's gorgeously bright, hard-edge abstractions, from the same decade. A strikingly slapdash self-portrait by Emma Amos, from 1966, centers the artist's intense, direct gaze. Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of powerful photography on view, from Coreen Smith's spontaneous portraits of Harlemites in the seventies to Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems's poignant pairings of image and text, from the eighties. But it's the ephemera here—the raw documentation and spirited newsletters—that become the exhibition's fascinating glue, showing these women not as anomalous achievers but as part of a formidable movement. *Through Sept. 17.*

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## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### Ellen Berkenblit

The painter, based in New York since the heyday of the East Village scene, in the eighties, continues to find limitless potential in her own mood-lit corner of the world. Working for the first time on stretched patchworks of calico fabric, an effect that suggests a cross between Carroll Dunham and Betsey Johnson, she portrays her signature women, always in profile, with razor-fish noses, thick lashes, and beribboned toques. These are attended by sparsely rendered chestnut horses on canvas. Elsewhere, plump fingers with fuchsia and crimson nails pluck flowers against dark, mournful backgrounds. In "Tincture of Musk," the fingers of a giant hand (a nod, perhaps, to Philip Guston's iconic canvas "The Line") are positioned as if they had just released a pinch of something into a potion. *Through July 7. (Kern, 16 E. 55th St. 212-367-9663.)*

### Susan Meiselas

"Prince Street Girls, 1976-1979" is a captivating series of black-and-white photographs featuring a small group of tough, adventurous, and archetypally bored girls who hung out on the streets of New York's Little Italy in the nineteen-seventies, near the photographer's loft. Meiselas was an outsider, an artist taking advantage of cheap downtown space, and her unconventional life won her the girls' fascination and friendship. With their feathered haircuts and adult poses—whether in school uniforms or in halter tops and denim shorts—Meiselas's subjects represent a distinct era of unsupervised childhood in an ungentrified city. These kids rode graffiti-covered subways to the beach, and smoked cigarettes while perched on car hoods. Camaraderie, competition, and protectiveness are all palpable in their body language in candid pictures that also convey vulnerability—and a faith that there's some safety in numbers. *Through June 17. (Higher Pictures, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-249-6100.)*

### Martin Roth

It's easy to mistake Roth's new installation for a soothing refuge from turbulent politics: six long rows of English lavender grow from several tons of imported topsoil. Roth, whose art always involves living organisms, has amplified the background noise of the building's machinery, which now sounds curiously like crickets, and papered the walls with images of a forest. But the lights are set to brighten or dim depending on the frequency with which Donald Trump, Breitbart, and other contentious voices are bombarding Twitter. This isn't aromatherapy—it's an experiment in sublimated anxiety. *Through June 21. (Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 E. 52nd St. 212-319-5300.)*

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## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Ray Johnson

These collages made between the mail artist's withdrawal from the New York gallery scene, in the late nineteen-seventies, and his suicide, in 1995, revolve around sex, death, and celebrity. It's as if he were trying to uncover a unifying dark force beneath it all. In one untitled example, Jasper Johns stares at James Dean, who has a Coca-Cola bottle poised suggestively at his lips. Johnson's art is often hilarious; in a self-portrait, we see the artist staring straight at the camera as a pair of black-and-white shoe prints, borrowed from an instructional dance diagram, sprout from his forehead like rabbit ears. But the show is also heartbreaking in its restless quest for some kind of clarity. *Through June 24. (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.)*

### Thomas Trosch

If you like Florine Stettheimer, these loosely figurative paintings are a must-see—Trosch, who works in Baltimore, has a similarly confectionery approach. In "The Kind Keeper," his use of encaustic evokes melted birthday candles. A party is never far off; in "The Lady, the Artist, and the Octopus," a purple sculptor shows off a green octopus to a patron in a yellow ball gown. But the show's highlight is the back room, where several larger works from the nineteen-nineties integrate scraps of found dialogue into their surreal self-satire. In "Dorothy Rodgers' Decorating Lesson #14," a woman in opera gloves and an enormous hat confides in her friends, "I remain entirely untouched by what I call 'mechanical art.'" *Through June 23. (Fredericks & Freiser, 536 W. 24th St. 212-633-6555.)*

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## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

### Patricia Treib

The young New York painter is a welcome addition to the roster of one of the Lower East Side's most reliably interesting galleries. Thinly painted, brightly colored, vaguely pictorial forms on slick, off-white surfaces have all the understated elegance of ikebana. In the vaguely symmetrical "Pendulum," one of seven large canvases here, brown strokes at the lower edge of the image converge into a candlelike form, below swaths of dark and light blue, red, yellow, and pink. Two paintings, "Skirt" and "Enfold," vary the same composition by switching a sort of harp from yellow to green and a calligraphic serif from brown to gray, like a sophisticated version of tangrams. *Through June 18. (Bureau, 178 Norfolk St. 212-227-2783.)*

# MOVIES



The architectural treasures of Columbus, Indiana, are the backdrop for Kogonada's first feature film, starring Haley Lu Richardson and John Cho.

## Building Blocks

*A new independent film looks at a young architecture connoisseur.*

The landscape of American independent filmmaking is shifting as the generation that revitalized the movement in the past decade has begun to take its place in the larger industry. As a result, a new generation of filmmakers is working in a field that's wide open for creative innovation, advancing without their predecessors' shared artistic ideas. The stylistic diversity of these new films is on view in this year's edition of BAMcinemaFest—New York's leading independent-film series, running June 14-25. One film being shown there, "Columbus," is the first feature directed by Kogonada, who makes distinctive artistic use of classical styles and of popular actors who are at home in them.

"Columbus" gets its title from the city where it's set—Columbus, Indiana, home to a remarkable collection of renowned works of modern architecture, including several designed by Eero Saarinen. (It's an apt subject for Kogonada, a visual artist who's also justly acclaimed for his

video essays.) Those buildings provide an extraordinary premise for the drama, which is a visionary transformation of a familiar genre: a young adult's coming-of-age story. For once, that trope doesn't involve a sexual awakening or a family revelation; it's the tale of an intellectual blossoming, thanks to a new friendship that arises amid troubled circumstances.

The protagonist, Cassandra, known as Casey, is played by Haley Lu Richardson, who's best known for her work in M. Night Shyamalan's "Split"; here, in her first major leading role, she plays a so-called architecture nerd, a recent Columbus high-school graduate who has spurned college and willingly stayed home to care for her mother (Michelle Forbes), a recovering meth addict. Casey works with little enthusiasm in a library (itself an architectural wonder), and she indulges her devotion to the local treasures quietly, hoping for little more than a job as a tour guide. When a visiting Korean architectural theorist is hospitalized, his grown son, Jin (John Cho), comes to town; Casey, a fan of the ailing man's work, befriends Jin, a translator who

quickly appreciates her agile mind while lamenting her narrow prospects.

Kogonada films the sharp-edged forms and contrapuntal lines of the city's avant-garde buildings with an analytical ardor akin to the discerning passion that Casey herself brings to them. He composes thoughtful, whimsical, free-flowing dialogue for her talks with Jin and with her smartly ironic but frustrated library colleague (Rory Culkin), as well as for Jin's encounters with an American scholar and friend (Parker Posey). These scenes have a vital dialectical urgency, thanks to the actors' subtly heightened, fiercely focussed energies.

Richardson in particular vaults to the forefront of her generation's actors with this performance, which virtually sings with emotional and intellectual acuity. With a minimum of gestural expression and an evident depth of thought, she delivers some heart-stopping moments of erudite whimsy that masks abysses of hidden vulnerability. Few performances—and few films—glow as brightly with the gemlike fire of precocious genius.

—Richard Brody

COURTESY NONETHELESS PRODUCTIONS



## OPENING

**The Journey** A dramatization of the 2006 negotiations between Ian Paisley (Timothy Spall) and Martin McGuinness (Colm Meaney), which resulted in a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Directed by Nick Hamm. *Opening June 16. (In limited release.)* • **Maudie** Sally Hawkins stars in this drama, based on the true story of a housekeeper in Nova Scotia in the mid-twentieth century who became a renowned folk artist. Directed by Aisling Walsh; co-starring Ethan Hawke. *Opening June 16. (In limited release.)* • **Rough Night** A comedy about five women whose wild bachelorette party results in the death of a male stripper. Directed by Lucia Aniello; starring Scarlett Johansson, Zoë Kravitz, Kate McKinnon, Ilana Glazer, and Jillian Bell. *Opening June 16. (In wide release.)*

## NOW PLAYING

**Alien: Covenant**

Ridley Scott returns to the feud between monster and human that he inaugurated in "Alien" (1979). The new work takes place long before the events described in that film, though *after* the gloomy shenanigans of "Prometheus." In short, we have a saga on our hands. On board the good spaceship Covenant, all is not well: after the captain's death, the devout but ineffectual Oram (Billy Crudup) takes charge. He and his crew, including Daniels (Katherine Waterston) and a serene android named Walter (Michael Fassbender), land on an unfamiliar planet, only to realize that hostile creatures have beaten them to the punch. The stylized goriness of what ensues is unprecedented for Scott, yet the plot, torn between different characters and writhing with a surfeit of beasts, lacks the clean lines of the first movie, and there is a doomed attempt, in the final reel, to ape the muscular thrills of James Cameron's "Aliens" (1986). If anyone commands the scene, it is Fassbender, playing two roles, who follows in the robotic footsteps of earlier synthetic men; even he, however, suffers beneath the burden of the backstory. Was the alien not scarier, and more implacable, when we knew nothing of its origins?—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 5/29/17.) (In wide release.)

**Angel**

Ernst Lubitsch serves medicinal bitters in the champagne flutes of this terse, elliptical, comedy-tinged yet pain-seared romance, from 1937. Marlene Dietrich plays Maria Barker, the neglected wife of the aristocratic Frederick (Herbert Marshall), a British diplomat. While he's crisscrossing Europe for the League of Nations, she heads to a Parisian salon-cum-brothel in search of new friends, and she finds one—a playboy named Anthony Halton (Melvyn Douglas), with whom she has a night of anonymous adventure before slipping back home to London. A few days later, the two men meet in high-society circles, and, when Anthony dines at Frederick's mansion, he embarrassingly meets his one-time lover again. Lubitsch sees the round of coincidences as a game of cruel destiny, albeit one that's played on the world stage against a backdrop of looming war. He contrasts Frederick's sexless gravity with Anthony's seductive frivolity; with suavely piercing touches of erotic wit, he points ahead to the modern audacities of "Belle de Jour" and "Last Tango in Paris," and to the higher irresponsibilities that make life worth living. In Lubitsch's world, all politics is sexual.—*Richard Brody* (Film Forum, June 14, and streaming.)

**Baywatch**

The success of "21 Jump Street" (2012) has left a load of flotsam in its wake. Studios feel emboldened to transform any old television series, no matter how rackety, into a bulbous film, and, if running low on inspiration, to make up the shortfall with a fistful of R-rated gags. Hence this latest addition to the genre, directed by Seth Gordon and starring Dwayne Johnson, Zac Efron, and Kelly Rohrbach as lifeguards caught in the rip-tide of hearty nonsense. But "21 Jump Street" had a functioning script, whereas the story line of this new movie appears to have been pasted together from the contents of a shredder. Struggling swimmers are rescued; reproductive organs are trapped and freed; corpses leak; and the sneers of the villain (Priyanka Chopra) are outdone by the leers of the camera, as it charts the breasts and pectorals of the protagonists. That ploy is especially tough on Alexandra Daddario, whose timing has plenty of snap, but whose role, as a fresh recruit to the team, pretty much begins and ends with her swimsuit. There are cameos, as predicted, by David Hasselhoff and Pamela Anderson, who need have no fear. The movie makes the TV show look like Congreve.—*A.L.* (6/5 & 12/17) (In wide release.)

**Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2**

The return of the ragtag outfit that made such an unexpected impression in 2014—here was a Marvel movie that presumed, if only in fits and starts, to spear its own pretensions. The crew in the sequel is pretty much unchanged: Peter Quill (Chris Pratt), who is way too goofy to deserve his title of Star-Lord; the mint-green Gamora (Zoe Saldana) and her semi-robotic sister (Karen Gillan); the enormous Drax (Dave Bautista), a stranger to the social graces; a thieving and sadistic critter named Rocket (voiced by Bradley Cooper); and Baby Groot (voiced by Vin Diesel), formerly a tree. New to the scene is Ego (Kurt Russell), whose name, it must be said, is a ready-made spoiler—he likes to flaunt his own planet in the way that other guys show off their sports cars. The director, as before, is James Gunn, but, as the plot grinds onward, with its compound of the flimsy and the over-spectacular, and as the finale drags on forever, you sense that the genial balance of the first film has been mislaid. When the biggest laughs arise from a small piece of computer-generated wood, where does a franchise go next?—*A.L.* (5/15/17) (In wide release.)

**It Comes at Night**

This modest science-fiction thriller brings the hands-on vigor of independent filmmaking to a high-concept premise, but the results are insubstantial and impersonal. It's set in a near future where the human race is threatened by a highly contagious and incurable disease. One family—mother (Carmen Ejogo), father (Joel Edgerton), and teenage son (Kelvin Harrison, Jr.)—has taken refuge in a sealed-off house in the woods. Another family—mother (Riley Keough), father (Christopher Abbott), and toddler (Griffin Robert Faulkner)—comes to them for help. The two families cohabit warily until the spectre of infection causes alarm. The director, Trey Edward Shults, who previously made "Krisha," a frenziedly realistic tale of family turmoil, relies on the threat of imminent death to reveal both the best and the worst aspects of family bonds. The cinematography, by Drew Daniels, with its bold low-light effects and eerily gliding camera work, maintains a mood of dread, and Shults deftly manages the glances and the gazes of silent fears and unspoken longings. But the film builds its tension through artificial silences that keep the characters as blank as chess pieces.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

**Letters from Baghdad**

A new documentary about Gertrude Bell, whose résumé alone leaves you breathless. Born in 1868, she was a British adventurer, heiress, mountaineer, cartographer, archeologist, and Arabist who ended up working alongside T. E. Lawrence, among others, to define and to establish the state that we now know as Iraq. Her own writings, not to mention those about her, fill many shelves, so the notion of cramming such a life into a single movie is, you might say, absurd. But the effort is worthwhile, and this study of Bell, directed by Sabine Krayenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum, is at once sober and enthusiastic. There is no narrator; Tilda Swinton provides the voice of Bell, reciting excerpts from her letters and journals. Most of the footage is archival, although the words of the heroine's contemporaries are spoken by actors, suitably costumed and filmed in black-and-white, so as to preserve the period mood. Bell's reservations about the wisdom of nation-building, let alone its feasibility, continue to resound today, while she herself, despite the wealth of documentation, remains oddly hard to grasp. You crave to know more.—*A.L.* (6/5 & 12/17) (In limited release.)

**Monkey Business**

Starting with the credit sequence, a mini-masterwork in which Cary Grant repeatedly misses his cue, Howard Hawks's 1952 science comedy is a summit of comic invention. Grant plays Barnaby Fulton, an absent-minded chemist with Coke-bottle glasses who's working on a rejuvenation formula that turns out to work all too well. Though he's happily married to Edwina (Ginger Rogers)—and Hawks saucily highlights the erotic spark in their long (albeit childless) marriage—Barnaby's first act under the formula's influence is the hot pursuit of his boss's decorative secretary, Miss Laurel (Marilyn Monroe). The jokes strike below the belt, as with a fish jumping in the pants of a doughy C.E.O. (Charles Coburn) and Barnaby's gaze at Miss Laurel's "acetates," but a mightier madness erupts when restored youth regresses further, to full-blown childhood, which, for Hawks, is no realm of lost innocence but a whirl of wild jealousy and murderous passion. The simians of the title are present throughout as the kissing cousins of the men of reason whose laboratory employs them.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives, June 17 and June 20, and streaming.)

**The Mummy**

This ludicrously overplotted and underconceived horror thriller, directed by Alex Kurtzman, also squanders a fine cast, headed by Tom Cruise and Sofia Boutella. Cruise plays Nick Morton, an antiquities hunter working with the U.S. Army in Iraq, who accidentally exhumes the five-thousand-year-old mummy of the Egyptian Princess Ahmanet (Boutella), a murderer possessed by a curse. Meanwhile, a London Underground excavation uncovers a medieval vault filled with Crusade plunder—including the gem that gave Ahmanet her evil powers—and she comes back to life, with devastating results, to recover it. Along the way, she tries to possess Nick, who's in love with the archeologist Jenny Halsey (Annabelle Wallis), and gory violence ensues. There's also a Jekyll-and-Hyde story featuring Russell Crowe, storms of crows and swarms of rats and spiders, live embalming, face-eating, and urban apocalypse; the over-all effect is that of a grab bag of supernatural shock tropes thrown together at random. The movie's huge sets, big stars, and fussy cinematography are at odds with the slapdash direction and the flimsy story, which are better suited to grade-Z low-budget fare.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)



### The Times of Harvey Milk

This lucid, empathic 1984 documentary about the first openly gay elected official in California focusses on Harvey Milk as a grassroots politician who viewed gay rights as just one part of a democratizing movement in San Francisco government. He rose to a seat on the Board of Supervisors in 1977, after the city moved toward neighborhood rule; in chronicling his story, the filmmakers, Rob Epstein and Richard Schmeichen, choose an array of apt yet unpredictable eyewitnesses to his ascent, including a union activist, Jim Elliot, who remembers wondering how he could tell his union brothers to vote for "a fruit." Seeing Milk through their group lens, we share in his victory and are devastated all over again when a former board member, Dan White, assassinates Milk and Mayor George Moscone. The ensuing trial, where White employed the infamous "Twinkie defense," fills you with an impatient anger, but it in no way diminishes this movie's aching beauty.—*Michael Sragow* (*Metrograph*, June 19, and streaming.)

### War Machine

This satirical drama is based on the late Michael Hastings's book "The Operators," which expanded on his 2010 profile, in *Rolling Stone*, of General Stanley McChrystal, then in command of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Brad Pitt, growling and chewing his words, stars as General Glen McMahon, a fiery but scholarly officer whose commitment to victory in Afghanistan is matched only by his unrealistic definition of it. Craving good publicity, McMahon—a political player and a skillful administrator, a hands-on warrior and a master tactician—lets a journalist, Sean Cullen (Scoot McNairy), follow him around. Then Cullen's report is published; it turns out to be an inside view of backroom manipulations, drunken revels, and freely vented contempt for President Obama, and results in McMahon's dismissal. Along the way, the writer and director, David Michôd, contrasts the dangers faced by soldiers in the field with the empty rhetoric of officers, such as McMahon, who place them in harm's way. The grim absurdity is reinforced by Cullen's knowing, ruefully ironic narration, which channels Hastings's own voice, but the comedic exaggerations—led by Pitt—lessen its impact. The most moving scenes involve McMahon's wife, Jeannie (Meg Tilly), whose sacrifices take place outside the spotlight.—*R.B.* (In limited release and on Netflix.)

### Wonder Woman

Patty Jenkins's first feature film since "Monster" (2003) covers a lot of ground. We start in present-day Paris, snap back to a mythological island in ancient Greece, then leap ahead to the First World War, initially in London and later on the Western Front. The constant, amid this variety, is Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot), known as Diana to her fellow Amazons, with whom she lived a splendidly man-free life on the blessed isle until the modern age rolled up and spoiled the fun. Thanks to Gadot, the heroine seems determined but never glum, and, even when righting the wrongs that beset the world, she finds time to be amused by regular mortals. The movie just about manages to survive the curse of the superheroic mode—a climax that numbs the senses and refuses to die down. With Robin Wright, as Diana's pugnacious aunt; Danny Huston, as a German general; David Thewlis, as a British statesman; and Chris Pine, as a cheerful American spy who, once he has mastered his doubts about consorting with an invincible legend in a breastplate, settles down to enjoy the ride.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### OPERA

#### Metropolitan Opera Summer Recital Series

The company's round of summer concerts offers popular arias, duets, and music-theatre numbers instead of full-length operas with orchestra. This year's lineup again spotlights young stars at the company as well as up-and-comers, with shows in all five boroughs. Susanna Phillips, Stephen Costello, and Elizabeth DeShong head to Brooklyn Bridge Park to repeat their June 12 Central Park program, and the soprano So Young Park, the tenor Petr Nekoranec, and the baritone Hyung Yun take the remaining performances; Dan Saunders plays piano. *June 14 at 7 at Brooklyn Bridge Park; June 16 at 7 at Clove Lakes Park, Staten Island; June 17 at 7 at Crotona Park, the Bronx. (No tickets required.)*

#### River to River Festival: "A Marvelous Order"

The festival presents a twenty-five-minute sequence of excerpts from a multimedia opera about the conflict between Robert Moses, the imposing civic developer, and Jane Jacobs, the pioneering urban activist, created by the composer Judd Greenstein, the librettist Tracy K. Smith, the choreographer Will Rawls, and the director Joshua Frankel. For this site-specific adaptation, presented free of charge, singers (including the stirring bass-baritone Dashon Burton) and instrumentalists perform dispersed throughout the Fulton Center transit terminal, while Frankel's images fill L.E.D. screens overhead. *June 15 and June 17-18 at 7. (rivertorivernyc.com.)*

#### "Three Way"

In Robert Paterson's world of sex and music, modern technology and personal freedom liberate—and complicate—the eternal human need for connection, excitement, and intimacy. His trio of one-act comic operas (with librettos by David Cote), successfully premiered in January by Nashville Opera, arrives in New York for a four-performance run at BAM Fisher; Dean Williamson conducts an eight-member cast, with direction by John Hoopes. *June 15-17 at 7:30 and June 18 at 2. (321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. bam.org.)*

#### LoftOpera: "Pergolesi and Vivaldi"

The company, which has built its reputation on original productions of operas by Verdi, Mozart, Rossini, and Puccini, has decided to stretch itself with a staging of a liturgical work, Pergolesi's achingly beautiful "Stabat Mater." The soprano Heather Buck and the countertenor Randall Scotting are the soloists, and the program also includes selections by Vivaldi. *June 16-17 at 8:30. (The Muse, 350 Moffat St., Brooklyn. loftopera.com.)*

#### Caramoor: Opening Night with Angela Meade

The Katonah-based festival was an early champion of the sterling American soprano's career, and, given her immaculate credentials, it was only natural that she would be the artist-in-residence for the farewell season of Will Crutchfield's long-admired "Bel Canto at Caramoor" initiative. Meade anchors an opening-night concert of arias by Verdi, Bellini, and Donizetti, among others; Crutchfield conducts the Orchestra of St. Luke's. *June 17 at 8:30. (Katonah, N.Y. caramoor.org.)*

#### On Site Opera: "La Mère Coupable"

The final play in Beaumarchais's "Figaro" trilogy is little known today, in large part because it never got an opera like Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro" or

Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" to tell its story. Darius Milhaud attempted to rectify that problem in 1966 with this work, which receives its U.S. premiere from this nimble company, in a staging by Eric Einhorn; Geoffrey McDonald conducts. *June 20 at 7:30. Through June 24. (The Garage, 611 W. 50th St. osopera.org.)*

### ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

#### New York Philharmonic

Alan Gilbert, leading the orchestra's traditional Concerts in the Parks for the last time as music director, conducts a free program on Central Park's Great Lawn on June 14; at Cunningham Park, in Queens, on June 15; and at Prospect Park, in Brooklyn, on June 16. It features three works central to the city and to the Philharmonic's history: Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story," and Gershwin's "An American in Paris." (In addition, a group of Philharmonic musicians will perform on June 18 at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden, on Staten Island.) *June 14-16 at 8 and June 18 at 3. (No tickets required. nyphil.org.)*

### RECITALS

#### St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble: "Facets of Schubert"

The Orchestra of St. Luke's continues its chamber series at the Morgan Library & Museum by concentrating its efforts on a three-week festival that will bring interdisciplinary elements into play. The second of three programs explores music that the composer left unfinished along with a commanding work that the composer never lived to hear: the String Quintet in C Major. Two Morgan curators, Carolyn Vega and Ilona van Tuinen, discuss the general concept of "unfinished" works in a pre-concert talk with the orchestra's president, James Roe. *June 14 and June 16 at 7:30. (Madison Ave. at 36th St. This event will be repeated at the Brooklyn Museum on June 18.)*

#### Bargemusic

An evening of works by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Lewis Spratlan begins the weekend at the floating chamber-music series. The concert features the world premieres of the Second Piano Quartet and the Six Preludes for Piano, in addition to the New York premiere of the Trio for Clarinet, Violin, and Piano; the superb musicians include members of Orpheus and of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. *June 16 at 8. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. For tickets and full schedule, see bargemusic.org.)*

#### Infrequent Seams Spring Festival

The New York-based record label, positioned at the fertile intersection of contemporary classical music, improvisation, and noise, mounts an abundant four-evening series featuring the S.E.M. Ensemble and additional artists. Highlights include a visit by Rhode Island's Providence Research Ensemble, offering opalescent minimalist works by its leader, J. P. A. Falzone, and a performance by the composer and accordionist Ben Richter. *June 19-22 at 7. (Willow Place Auditorium, 26 Willow Pl., Brooklyn. Tickets at the door.)*

# DANCE



Diana Vishneva in her 1996 debut as Juliet, in "Romeo and Juliet," at the Mariinsky Theatre.

## Alfa Romeo

*American Ballet Theatre says farewell to Diana Vishneva.*

If you want to see what's so good about Russian ballerinas, without also having to see what can be so bad about them, buy a ticket to one of Diana Vishneva's performances with American Ballet Theatre. Don't wait, though. She is leaving A.B.T. in late June.

Vishneva has one of the world's leading examples of the powerhouse lower back that is the secret of Russian ballet and, in some measure, all good ballet. She can twist, dive, and bend

until you think she is going to do herself harm. Even when she's performing small steps, or no steps, you can still feel, across the auditorium, that astonishing engine, humming along like an Alfa Romeo, at the base of her spine. It doesn't just produce the movements; it unifies them, makes sense of them, makes them art.

To Western eyes, many Russian dancers overact, and Vishneva's acting, too, is pretty enthusiastic. I remember her in Kenneth MacMillan's "Romeo and Juliet," arguing so passionately with her father about her marriage plans that I thought, She's going to rip

her dress. Sure enough, in the next scene, in Friar Lawrence's cell, she turned around and her gown was torn in back. Earlier, in the balcony scene, when she spied Romeo in her garden, she seemed not so much to move as to *pulse* toward him, like the tide being pulled by the moon. No matter how large-scaled her acting, though, she always looked sincere. That's her deviation from the practice of many Russian ballerinas today. How hard they can be! Over-rehearsed, over-styled, lacquered—bronzed. Some people like that in the Russians. It makes them feel they got their money's worth. To me, it's camp. Vishneva manages to be extreme and relaxed simultaneously. She has a good time.

She has told interviewers that, when she first tried out for the school of the Kirov Ballet, she was rejected on the ground that she was too weak. "She is nothing," the auditioners said. "She only has a face." She worked hard and eventually got into the school, and over the years she became immensely strong. It is amazing how many difficult steps that small body can produce, how fast. As for her having a face, you can say that again. She has perfect stage features. High forehead, big eyes: face forever, face readable in the fifth ring.

Vishneva is leaving A.B.T., she says, because she's overscheduled. She joined the Kirov in 1995, at the age of nineteen, and became a principal dancer in one year. A decade later, she joined A.B.T., again as a principal dancer, without leaving the Kirov. Dancers do that kind of double duty these days. And, in between, they fly around making guest appearances. Vishneva did. I think it's dangerous, and maybe Vishneva, now forty years old, has come to think so, too. She will make her A.B.T. farewell on June 23, in John Cranko's "Onegin," not a great ballet, not even a good one, maybe, but in any case a big, slurpy romantic one, with lots of acrobatic partnering. She'll leave with a bang.

—Joan Acocella

COURTESY NINA ALOVERT



**American Ballet Theatre**

What would ballet be without "Swan Lake"? The perennial favorite returns for eight performances, led by seven different casts. (Only Misty Copeland gets two performances, both with Herman Cornejo, June 13 and June 17.) It starts, on June 12, with a promising new partnership, between Isabella Boylston and the company's recent Danish import, Alban Lendorf; he's a fine dancer-actor, in the Danish tradition, and she's a charismatic technician. Devon Teuscher, an exceedingly gifted soloist, has her New York debut in the lead role at the matinée on June 14. Then it's on to John Cranko's 1965 rendition of Alexander Pushkin's "Onegin," the sad tale of a St. Petersburg roué who, too late, discovers love. On June 19, the Russian ballerina Diana Vishneva dances the role of the delicate Tatiana, in the first of two performances, with Marcelo Gomes, that will be her last with the company. And, on June 20, Alessandra Ferri, returning one year after her A.B.T. comeback, is squired by the Italian heartthrob Roberto Bolle. • June 12-13 and June 15-16 at 7:30, June 14 at 2 and 7:30, and June 17 at 2 and 8: "Swan Lake." • June 19-20 at 7:30: "Onegin." (*Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center. 212-477-3030. Through July 8.*)

**"Armitage / Buglisi / Monte / Muller"**

There was a time, not so long ago, when each of the companies of these choreographers could command a theatre on its own. Their banding together is as much a sign of diminished status as of solidarity, but the joint program is a bargain for their fans. Karole Armitage premieres an excerpt of her folkish new piece, "Walls." Tiffany Rea-Fisher, the current director of Elisa Monte Dance, presents "1:3:4:1," an ode to the outdoors. Jacquelyn Buglisi offers "Moss 1," a tribute to the slow-growing plant and a metaphor for human existence, while Jennifer Muller shows an excerpt of "The Spotted Owl," a dance-and-spoken-word work about, fittingly enough, endangered species. (*New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. June 13-17.*)

**L.A. Dance Project**

Once again a free man after a brief, tumultuous tenure at the Paris Opéra, Benjamin Millepied has recommitted to the ensemble he founded in 2012. The troupe, which performs a well-curated mix of ballet and contemporary and modern dance, now returns to the Joyce with a program that includes works by the Israel-based superstar Ohad Naharin (of Bat-Sheva Dance Company), Justin Peck (of New York City Ballet), Merce Cunningham, and Millepied himself. "Yag," a twenty-year-old piece that depicts the complicated dynamics within a family unit, offers a fascinating glimpse into Naharin's early style. One of three dances by Millepied, the new "In Silence We Speak," includes performances by two greatly loved retired ballerinas, Janie Taylor and Carla Körbes. (*175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. June 13-18 and June 20. Through June 25.*)

**Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre**

Robert Battle, the troupe's artistic director, has a connection to "Moonlight": like the director of that Oscar-winning film, he grew up in Liberty City, Miami, where the film is set. His company's gala performance, on June 15, features a short work he's made, inspired by the movie and starring yet another Miami native, the gentle giant Jamar Roberts. Other-

wise, the strongest program of the one-week season reprises last year's "r-Evolution, Dream" and "Untitled America," two uneven but worthwhile efforts at topicality. The best news is the return of the suave former star dancer Clifton Brown. (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. June 14-18.*)

**"The Reception"**

This is the kind of party in which everything seems sociable and shallow until someone starts screaming: a bit of Buñuel with a timely dash of "Twin Peaks." Created by Sean Donovan (known for his work with Miguel Gutierrez and Faye Driscoll) and Sebastián Calderón Bentin, the piece is a mix of scripted and improvised, tightly choreographed and berserk. The intrepid cast includes the unflappable veteran Ishmael Houston-Jones. (*HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101. June 14-18 and June 20. Through June 24.*)

**River to River Festival**

The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's free festival reliably offers a burst of the most interesting dance performances of the summer, in fun settings. One highlight, on Governors Island, is the finale of Wally Cardona and Jennifer Lacey's "The Set Up," a multi-year project in which crash courses in foreign dance traditions (Cambodian, Okinawan, Indian) are transformed into postmodern deconstructions, with results both exasperating and beautiful. In the moat at Fort Jay, the artist John Monti fashions a psychedelic surrounding for the gossamer motions of Jodi Melnick. At the National Museum of the American Indian, Netta Yerushalmy picks apart Martha Graham's "Night Journey" and Alvin Ailey's "Revelations." The programming also reprises Beth Gill's spellbinding "Catacomb" and Faye Driscoll's skillful but juvenile "Thank You for Coming: Play." (*Various venues. rivertorivernyc.com. June 14-20. Through June 25.*)

**Sally Silvers / "Tenderizer"**

The eclectic experimentalist Sally Silvers presents a tripartite evening. The first section is an expansion of her work from 2014, "Actual Size," in which she riffs on themes from Hitchcock's noirish thrillers (with a score that incorporates bits of movie soundtracks). The second is a raucous celebration of girl power. And the third, true to her postmodernist roots, is a structured improvisation for a quartet of dancers. The stellar group includes Silvers and three former Cunninghamites: Melissa Toogood, Brandon Collwes, and Dylan Crossman. (*Roulette, 509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. 917-267-0368. June 15-17.*)

**Lori Belilove & the Isadora Duncan Dance Company / Sara Mearns**

Duncan, born a hundred and forty years ago, remains a figure of fascination (Exhibit A: Amelia Gray's new book, "Isadora: A Novel"), and this troupe is the best tender of her flame. Considering her disparagement of ballet and her religious conviction regarding her own reformation and revolutionizing of dance, it's hard to guess what she would have thought of New York City Ballet's Sara Mearns performing her work. Regardless, Mearns is the star attraction of this one-night engagement, making her debut in the Duncan solo "Narcissus," in a program of solo and group works ranging across Duncan's career. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. June 19.*)

# THE THEATRE

## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Hamlet

Oscar Isaac stars in Sam Gold's production of the tragedy, featuring Keegan-Michael Key as Horatio. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. *Previews begin June 20.*)

### Marvin's Room

The Roundabout revives Scott McPherson's 1990 comedy, directed by Anne Kauffman, in which two estranged sisters (Janeane Garofalo and Lili Taylor) reunite when one of them is diagnosed with leukemia. (*American Airlines Theatre*, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. *In previews.*)

### Measure for Measure

Theatre for a New Audience stages Shakespeare's tale of a nun and a corrupt official, directed by Simon Godwin and featuring Jonathan Cake, Cara Ricketts, and Thomas Jay Ryan. (*Polonsky Shakespeare Center*, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. *Previews begin June 17.*)

### 1984

Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan's adaptation of George Orwell's dystopian novel transfers from the West End, featuring Tom Sturridge, Olivia Wilde, and Reed Birney. (*Hudson*, 139-141 W. 44th St. 855-801-5876. *In previews.*)

### Pipeline

In Dominique Morisseau's play, directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, an inner-city public-school teacher sends her son to a private academy, where an incident threatens to get him expelled. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. *Previews begin June 15.*)

## NOW PLAYING

### Cost of Living

The opening monologue, delivered from a barstool by a lovable, exasperating lug, sets the tone: funny, intimate, aching, mysterious. As the action unfolds, Martyna Majok's play seems at first to be about disability: one character has cerebral palsy, another is missing both legs (conditions shared by the actors who play them, Gregg Mozgala and Katy Sullivan, both excellent), and the plot involves their evolving relationships with new caregivers (Jolly Abraham and Victor Williams, also great). But the wheelchairs turn out to be MacGuffins. This is really a play about trust, and about the failures of communication that impede it, sometimes tragically. Jo Bonney's frank direction, for Manhattan Theatre Club, is always alert to the mordant humor of Majok's script, which plays with time in a way that amplifies the intrigue and confounds predictability without sacrificing clarity. (*City Center Stage I*, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

### The End of Longing

Matthew Perry, in his playwriting debut, plays Jack, a lonely and sardonic alcoholic with the "tolerance of a charging elephant." At a bar one night, he meets Stephanie (Jennifer Morrison), a high-end escort so charmed that she dates him for free, while his dim but sweet pal Jeffrey (Quincy Dunn-Baker) hooks up with her friend Stevie (Sue Jean Kim). The two romances progress, until it becomes clear that Jack's drinking is less a quirk than an abyss into which relationships plummet. During his "Friends" years, Perry struggled publicly with substance abuse, and the play seems to be a reckoning with the way that addiction erodes a social circle—addicts can't, and won't, be there for you. But Perry stops short of true ugliness.

The play, directed by Lindsay Posner for MCC, skates along rom-com and sitcom clichés, with some groan-inducing lines ("He thinks that 'Jurassic Park' was a documentary") thrown in. (*Lucille Lortel*, 121 Christopher St. 212-352-3101.)

### The Government Inspector

In this adaptation of Gogol's 1836 play, set in a provincial Russian town where the corruption runs as deep as the mud in the street, Jeffrey Hatcher retains the original framework but gives the jokes a zingy modern spin. Jesse Berger, who directs the raucous Red Bull Theatre production, freely mixes in bits from the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, and Woody Allen. Leading a cast of characters in whom virtue is universally absent, Michael Urie is charming as hell as the lucky and manipulative object of mistaken identity (his drunk scene is a comic masterpiece), while Arnie Burton does superlative double duty as a cynical servant and a postmaster who reads all the mail. As the mayor, Michael McGrath bluffs and blusters to the hilt, and Mary Testa, as his wife, earns big laughs just by changing the pitch of her voice. (*The Duke on 42nd Street*, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

### Julius Caesar

Oskar Eustis directs the Public's first free Shakespeare in the Park offering of the summer, featuring Nikki M. James (Portia), Elizabeth Marvel (Antony), Corey Stoll (Brutus), and John Douglas Thompson (Cassius). (*Delacorte, Central Park*. *Enter at 81st St. at Central Park W.* 212-967-7555. *Through June 18.*)

### Somebody's Daughter

At fifteen, Alex Chan (Michelle Heera Kim) has a 4.5 G.P.A., speaks four languages, and plays five instruments. Alas, her social skills are in inverse proportion to her I.Q., her emotional maturity and street smarts having been stunted by a tyrannical "tiger mother" (Vanessa Kai). Luckily, Alex finds a surrogate parent in Kate Wu (Jeena Yi), a guidance counsellor whose irreverence is paired with a woeful disdain for professional boundaries. In Chisa Hutchinson's dramedy, directed by May Adrales at Second Stage Uptown, Chinese-American families suffer under the weight of self-imposed expectations and ingrained prejudices (Alex's folks would have preferred a boy). As if this weren't enough, Hutchinson also stirs interracial romances into the plot. Breezy and melodramatic, the play moves along in a series of telegraphed beats—the characters don't converse, they lecture one another. (*McGinn/Cazale*, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 212-246-4422.)

### Woody Sez: The Life & Music of Woody Guthrie

Devised a decade ago by David M. Lutken, who plays Guthrie, in collaboration with the director Nick Corley and three other highly versatile performers (two of whom remain in the cast for this production), this outstanding biographical show about the radical American folk giant makes its New York City debut, and it couldn't have arrived at a better time. Simply as a revue of dozens of Guthrie's songs, it's superb: the orchestrations offer a delightful variety of approaches to the material, and all four cast members are rich singers who totally shred on their instruments and seem ready for anything after their years on tour. But it's also a politically invigorating and inventive reflection on Guthrie's life and times, whose echoes with our own are frequent but never forced. (*Irish Repertory*, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)



Kevin Spacey plays the title role in "Clarence Darrow," David W. Rintels's one-man bio-play from 1974 about the civil-rights lawyer, staged at Arthur Ashe Stadium, in Flushing, Queens, June 15-16.



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# NIGHT LIFE

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## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Elvis Costello

Costello isn't the intense spitfire he was in the late seventies, when he led the crop of Angry Young Men who bridged the gap between punk and New Wave. Nor is he the songwriting superhero he was in the eighties, when he could knock out classic albums like "King of America" and "Blood and Chocolate" in the same year, or the restless talent of the nineties, when he jumped from genre to genre, often via collaboration, flirting with classical ("The Juliet Letters," with the Brodsky Quartet) and sublimely subtle adult pop ("Painted from Memory," with Burt Bacharach). These days, though, Costello still makes interesting choices (his last record, "Wise Up Ghost," was a team-up with the Roots), and he's increasingly sharing the contours of his life with his fans; his last New York engagements included a large-screen display that projected family photos, scribbled notes, and other personal ephemera. (*SummerStage, Rumsey Playfield, Central Park, mid-Park at 69th St. summerstage.org. June 15.*)

### Forth Wanderers

Ava Trilling, the stunning vocalist of this Montclair slacker outfit, graduated from high school last June. Forth Wanderers got their start with a self-released E.P., which quickly caught the attention of Lorde and, later, Father/Daughter Records. Few bands enjoy such an endearingly short path to fame, where news of your debut album may appear in your campus paper: Ben Guterl, the band's co-founder and primary songwriter, bounced between the studio and junior-year seminars, and described his band's quick rise to the *Oberlin Review* as "kind of overwhelming and a little nerve-wracking." It's also well deserved. The lo-fi, low-slung rock found on their four-song project, "Slop," is confident and untainted, and Guterl's mucky guitar tugs out Trilling's coy confessions in all the right ways: "I can't sleep when I'm uneasy / I get in my head, please relieve me," she sings on "Unfold." They open for **Sorority Noise**. (*Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. June 15.*)

### Half Waif

Nandi Rose Plunkett records and sings as Half Waif, when she's not playing with her crunch-folk band, Pinegrove. Fans of her solo material believe in her pop chops; throughout her April release, "form/a," the twenty-eight-year-old vocalist and producer offers cerebral, moody movements that build into splashing dance choruses. In her music, there are shades of the traditional *bhajans* and Celtic pop music that she inhaled as a child, thanks to her parents (an Indian refugee from Uganda and an Irish-American), but it was her time at Kenyon College, as a music major, and, eventually, her immersion in the dense D.I.Y. community in northern New Jersey, that expanded Plunkett's repertoire.

Influences from these environments graze her sound, but songs like "Frost Burn" still aren't easy to pin down. (*Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-260-4700. June 14.*)

### Ray BLK

Among the many exciting elements of London hip-hop's explosive current moment is its trove of prominent female voices, an inclusivity that puts its American counterpart to shame. Girls earn stripes in British rap for being relatable, or original, or funny, which has resulted in a wide spectrum of voices—and Ray BLK's is among the best. The daughter of Nigerian immigrants, she grew up in the notorious postcodes of South London, studied literature at Brunel University, and split her time between a copywriting job and night recording sessions. By last January, her self-released tracks, which saunter between cocky raps and tender, nineties-leaning R. & B. melodies about tough love and tougher lives, had garnered enough acclaim for BBC Music to dub her the "Sound of 2017," making her the first unsigned artist in the award's history to claim the title—previous recipients include Adele and Sam Smith. As music fans increasingly turn to London for new folk stories and sonic textures, BLK's "My Hood" is the closest thing the city may have to a modern anthem—a ballad about socks and sliders, English breakfasts, and 2 A.M. moped street races. (*Mercury Lounge, 217 E. Houston St. mercuryloungenyc.com. June 17.*)

### Sigur Rós

In what is surely one of the most eccentric guest appearances ever, this Icelandic rock band played original music in a 2013 episode of "The Simpsons," and the members were given the yellow-toned, overbite treatment. The band has been an avant-garde anomaly for more than two decades, releasing several albums of experimental, minimalist post-rock and toying with common expectations of dynamics and range. Jónsi Birgisson, the group's lead singer, employs a bold falsetto that chips through the dense arrangements, and his opaque affect has informed the band's unpredictable edge for years; he frequently writes and sings in "Hópe-landish," a language of his own creation. As one fan observed, commenting on a YouTube upload of "Hoppípolla," the band's biggest single and a movie-score staple, "Good music doesn't need to be translated for people to understand." (*Forest Hills Stadium, 1 Tennis Pl., Queens. forest-hillstadium.com. June 17.*)

### Toro y Moi

The producer and songwriter Chazwick Bundick, who performs as Toro y Moi, has tried out a long list of genres after arguably inventing his own. His ambling, fuzz-filled blend of dance and R. & B. was dubbed "chill-wave" by critics, and he's since explored angular indie rock, shimmering house, and, most recently, jazz. In 2016, the director Harry Israelson filmed "Live from Trona," a concert documentary and intimate portrait of the sheepish artist: Bundick performed amid the Trona Pinnacles, in California, and contributed original animations and behind-the-scenes clips of

rehearsals. Since 2010, the South Carolina native's releases as Toro y Moi have been sprawling, from the campus-dive thump of his debut, "Causers of This," to the woodland psychedelia of "What For?" Bundick is aided by both his charming squeak of a voice and his malleability, with a bold and broad palette that comes in handy when manning a dance floor. This week, he commandeers the Well's sound system for an all-day d.j. set that won't stay in any one place for too long. (*272 Meserole St., Brooklyn. 347-338-3612. June 17.*)

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## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### George Coleman

The tenor saxophonist Coleman may be more judicious with his energy these days, as he reflects on a career that took root in the late fifties, but the spirit is still very much willing. His most recent album, "A Master Speaks," finds this hard-bop patriarch doing what he does best—limning lush ballads and giving his all to lively mainstream romps. (*Smoke, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. June 16-18.*)

### Barry Harris Trio

With each passing year, it's getting harder to find living musicians who actually played with Charlie Parker, but, as a budding tenderfoot back in Detroit, the eighty-seven-year-old Barry Harris did. Since then, this dyed-in-the-wool bebop pianist has carefully buffed his reputation, and it now gleams with authentic lustre. He's joined by the bassist **Ray Drummond** and a longtime collaborator, the drummer **Leroy Williams**. (*Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. June 16-18.*)

### Marilyn Maye

Posting herself at the crossroads where cabaret, jazz, and Broadway meet, the resilient octogenarian vocalist Maye embodies showbiz experience that seems unimaginable today—including seventy-six appearances on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson." She may be a throwback to another era, but her life force speaks firmly of the now. (*Metropolitan Room, 34 W. 22nd St. 212-206-0440. June 14-17.*)

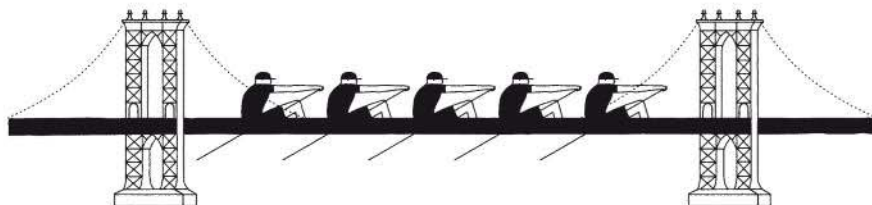
### Danilo Pérez, John Patitucci, Brian Blade Trio

What's missing from this picture? Wayne Shorter, of course, but the intrepid members of the great saxophonist's quartet meshed so well that remaining together as a creative unit, even without the master in charge, became imperative. The trio's 2015 debut recording, "Children of the Light," found the pianist Pérez, the bassist Patitucci, and the drummer Blade displaying the churning, intuitive interaction that made their work with Shorter a joy. (*Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. June 13-18.*)

### Tierney Sutton

Three years after she trained her sights on Joni Mitchell, with her 2013 musical mash note "After Blue," the inclusive jazz vocalist Sutton put a personal spin on the work of Gordon Sumner with "The Sting Variations." "Roxanne" didn't make the cut, but such soundtrack-of-a-generation material as "Message in a Bottle" and "Fields of Gold" is given new life. (*Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. June 15-17.*)

# ABOVE & BEYOND



## Summer Solstice Celebration

For the twenty-second consecutive year, the Paul Winter Consort stages a sunrise performance to herald the year's longest day. The group, joined by a thirty-two-voice choir, the Florida Singing Sons, begins the concert in darkness, with the music swelling in intensity as sunlight slowly fills the stained-glass windows of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The musicians will premiere new music and reimagine classics, incorporating elements of Bulgarian chant and the compositions of Eric Whitacre and Morten Lauridsen to create a singularly immersive and moving harmonic experience. "When I'm awake in the darkness before dawn, as the birds begin to sing, and the earth prepares for the sun," Winter says, "I feel as if life is beginning again." (1047 Amsterdam Ave. paulwinter.com. June 17 at 4:30 A.M.)

## Mermaid Parade

Coney Island's Surf Avenue draws even more enthusiasts than usual this week, as aquatic revellers don fish-scale suits and seashell bras to celebrate the start of summer. The Mermaid Parade was created in 1983 by Dick Zigun, known locally as the Mayor of Coney Island, who also founded the Coney Island Circus Sideshow. Each year, the parade crowns a King Neptune and a Mermaid Queen: past royalty includes David Byrne, Marty Markowitz, Queen Latifah, Lou Reed, and Laurie Anderson. Attendees can register to march in either family-friendly or "artsy" clusters (for mermaids taking advantage of the city's lenient laws on toplessness), or cruise along in antique cars and custom-designed floats. (Parade begins on Surf Ave. at W. 21st St., in Brooklyn. coneyisland.com/programs/mermaid-parade. June 17 at 1.)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The auction circuit has its last hurrah before the summer lull. On June 15, **Christie's** dedicates itself to books, manuscripts, and ephemera, starting with items from the Metropolitan Opera Guild Collection, a selection that includes musical scores, letters, and memorabilia. The scores in this sale are headlined by a surprisingly neat manuscript of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A-Flat Major, signed by the composer. For balletomanes, there is a pair of satin toe shoes by Freed of London, signed by Margot Fonteyn; ornithological tomes follow in a separate sale, as well as a more general selection of first editions and the like. An intensely colored eighteen-carat emerald

ring, owned for generations by the Rockefeller family, stands out among the handsome gemstones at the house's auction of jewelry, on June 20. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • American art from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is the subject of **Swann's** final sale of the season (June 15), led by a sunny beach scene ("The Beach, Isle Adam") by the realist painter William Glackens. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### New York Public Library

Consider how Lee Friedlander must have felt when, after decades of photographing Manhattan's tableaux of cabs, construction sites, storefronts, and the pedestrians who bob and weave among them, he began to notice another subject clogging his frame with increasing frequency: cell phones. Faces that once met the eye line of the camera now angled downward with intent. It has become a fixation of his in recent years, as the eighty-two-year-old photographer continues to do what he's always done: capture city landscapes that exist only for a millisecond, extending the work of Venetian and French painters who reproduced the scenes that unfurled before them. For the first time in more than three decades, Friedlander speaks publicly about his life and work, in conversation with his grandson, Giancarlo T. Roma; the duo recently revived Friedlander's nineteen-seventies publishing company, Haywire Press, to republish books and portfolios from the photographer's vast collection. (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, 476 Fifth Ave. 917-275-6975. June 20 at 7.)

### Strand Bookstore

Wallace Shawn, the son of the *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, has forged a far-reaching and unpredictable career as both a pillar of dissent and a fixture in popular culture. During his five decades in entertainment, he's written surreal alternative theatre and children's films, giving voice to proletariat rage and cartoon dinosaurs alike. He sets his sights on our current political climate in "Night Thoughts," a collection of essays and anecdotes addressing the Islamic State, Yemen, Osama bin Laden, 9/11, Marxism, and, not least, President Donald J. Trump. But the author is hesitant to suggest that he has answers, and instead offers "conversation starters." He discusses his writings at this talk with Hari Kondabolu, a young comedian from Queens with a similarly wide gaze and sharp tongue. (828 Broadway. strandbooks.com. June 22 at 7.)



# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### The Fat Monk

949 Columbus Ave., at 107th St.  
(212-837-2334)

Those faint of heart, stomach, and stamina had better sit this one out. Gas-tropubs may be a self-evidently poor choice for the health-conscious, but at the Fat Monk, a cozy newcomer on the northern tip of the Upper West Side, the love of confit—in all its grease-glistened glory—is rapturously embraced as creed.

“No rules!” is how the Long Island-born head chef, Rob McCue (who appeared on the cooking-competition show “Hell’s Kitchen”), describes his unapologetically indulgent menu. The bacchanalia of brûléed bone marrow, pig knuckles, and bone-in rib eye makes the cheese board and devilled eggs look like dieter’s specials. In this no-rules suzerainty, calorie counting might be the only criminal offense.

Start with the Oyster Escargot, the more modish and richer cousin of Oysters Rockefeller. McCue swaps out the spinach and watercress for escargot-Pernod butter, crusts the sauce with a blowtorch, and garnishes the top with—what else?—caviar. Those tempted by tater tots but scornful of plebeian starch will be delighted by the Dungeness-crab iteration, which boasts some fifteen ingredients, including fresh crabmeat, mozzarella, serrano pepper, celery, scal-

lions, and, begrudgingly, potatoes—but “only because it makes the tots super crispy.”

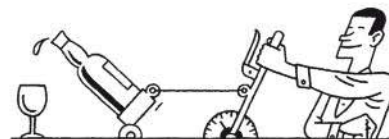
McCue allows himself to stray from Euro-American classics only briefly, but it’s worth it. The dish Not a Ramen, which the chef named carefully “so as not to insult the ramen gods,” is more of an homage to the Asian noodle soup which plays with the same components—meaty broth, short rib—but heightens the over-all effect with marrow in a bone the size of your fist.

The same flagrantly decadent sensibility applies to the Fat Monk’s pièce de résistance, the duck burger, which took McCue more than a year to perfect and turned into an alchemy project of sorts. Among the questions plaguing the chef during the burger’s gestation: “Where do you find a bun sturdy enough so the grease doesn’t bleed through?” and “How do you deliver the pungent immediacy of duck breast?” The answers: pain de mie from Balthazar; stuff the duck meat with Emmentaler cheese and pile on whole shallots roasted in fat and foie-gras aioli until “everything oozes.”

Chances are that, at the end of a meal at the Fat Monk, patrons will likely come to resemble their entrées—stuffed with countless ingredients, fat-slicked, bulging a little too conspicuously in the middle—and become confit-adoring converts, at least for the night. (*Entrées \$12–\$58.*)

—Jiayang Fan

## BAR TAB



### The Campbell

15 Vanderbilt Ave. (212-297-1781)

When the Campbell Apartment closed, last year, some worried that another classic New York bar was dead. Once the office of the financier and railroad executive John W. Campbell, the cavernous room hidden in a west ventricle of Grand Central Terminal had multiple uses after his passing, in 1957, but eventually fell into disrepair. In the nineties, Mark Grossich carefully renovated the space, turning it into the Campbell Apartment; its Florentine-style ceiling (repainted by hand), original wooden details, and formal dress code quickly made it a city icon. In 2016, the M.T.A. decided to transfer the lease to the Gerber Group, a hospital-ity company, which promised to renovate the space and remove the dress code—hence the beloved Campbell Apartment’s closure, and the fear that, when the bar returned, it would be less Lazarus, more zombie. Despite the modified moniker, to the naked eye, things are much the same—even the signs in the Main Concourse still bear the old name. The cocktails remain excellent—likely because Paris DuRante, who worked at the old place for sixteen years, is back making them. On a rainy afternoon, the Bull Shot (nineteen dollars)—a classic drink from the fifties, containing beef broth and vodka—was spectacularly unusual and salty, and a John Campbell’s Martini (twenty-five dollars) was smooth, with sumptuous olives. The prices feel like they’re from the future, but you’re also paying for the luxurious view of the past. Some sights aren’t worth seeing, however—the chicken sandwich (eighteen dollars) is about the size of a pile of eighteen worn dollar bills, and not much more appetizing. At least with the lack of a dress code, it won’t drip onto your good clothes.—Colin Stokes



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT THE MAN IN THE ROOM

The Republican members of the Senate Intelligence Committee didn't put up much of a defense of President Donald Trump's character at a hearing last Thursday, when James Comey, the former F.B.I. director, described the events that had led to the President's firing him. Instead, they generally praised Comey for his honor and his service, even after he said that he had felt the need to memorialize his meetings with Trump because of "the particular person" he was dealing with. "I was honestly concerned that he might lie," Comey said of the President of the United States.

The closest that the Republicans came to a counteroffensive was when they wondered why Comey hadn't got Trump some help. Marco Rubio, of Florida, suggested that Comey could have informed the White House counsel that "someone needs to go tell the President that he can't do these things." These "things" included his asking everyone at an Oval Office meeting, including Comey's direct boss, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, to leave the room so that Trump could lean on Comey to drop the F.B.I.'s investigation of Michael Flynn, the former national-security adviser, and his contacts with Russian officials.

The President shouldn't require tutoring on the basics of obstruction of justice. Still, Comey said that he had tried to make the parameters of their relationship clear. He had explained to

the President how important it was that the F.B.I. be independent. In an extraordinary move, Comey had also visited the Attorney General to "implore" him to never again leave him alone in a room with the President.

Sessions is a singularly compromised choice to fill the role of protector of investigative independence, though, and not just because he was one of Trump's earliest and most avid supporters and the first senator to endorse him. During his confirmation hearings, Sessions had misrepresented his own contacts with Russian officials, and, at the time of the Oval Office meeting, Comey believed, rightly, that Sessions would soon recuse himself from the investigation of Russia's role in the 2016 campaign.

One effect of Comey's appearance has been to create an imperative that

Sessions himself be called to testify before Congress. The Attorney General had tried to linger after being asked to leave the Oval Office. Was it because, as Comey thought, he suspected that something improper was about to happen? What was Sessions thinking when Comey asked that he not be left alone with the President? And when Sessions wrote a letter that Trump used to justify firing the F.B.I. director, was he, as Senator Ron Wyden, of Oregon, asked on Thursday, violating the terms of his recusal? "It's a reasonable question," Comey said.

What is most striking about Comey's story, however, is that, in asking to get out of the room with the President, he was seeking the opposite of what so many other people in Washington seem to want. In the opening remarks that Comey had prepared for the committee, he described the door in the Oval Office, "next to the grandfather clock," cracking open, and his catching a glimpse of Reince Priebus, the chief of staff, with a clutch of people in line behind him, like courtiers in a Renaissance painting, waiting for an audience.

There is something like a mass delusion, in policy circles and beyond, that if a sensible person can be the last one to speak with Trump before he makes a decision, the right decision will be made, and the Republic—or, at least, the Paris climate accord or our relations with NATO allies—will be saved. This theory is often based on the notion that Trump has no ideology or deeply held policy preferences, and therefore that he is an empty vessel,





ready to be filled with the instruction of the wise, or the merely clever.

But if Trump lacks principles it is not because no one has ever bothered to present him with any. He is not some child of nature. He does have beliefs, and prejudices, centered on his own power and prerogatives. Comey said that Trump told him he had a “need” for loyalty. There have also been reports, in the *Times* and elsewhere, that Trump is furious with Sessions for recusing himself and thus leaving the investigation in more independent hands, and that Sessions offered to resign.

Others may yet realize that being in a closed room with Trump can be morally suffocating. Comey provided a model of how to move into the “public square,” as he put it, by recording doubts about the Chief Executive in memos, in order to be able to speak about them accurately when the need arose. Senator Roy Blunt, of Missouri, asked Comey

why he had felt free to give those memos to a friend, a professor at Columbia Law School, who had, in turn, given them to the press. Trump’s lawyer later referred to this as an “unauthorized disclosure” of “privileged communications.” On Friday, the President tweeted, “WOW, Comey is a leaker!”

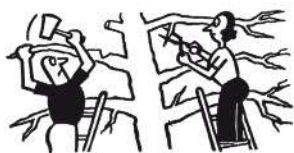
Comey, however, says that he was careful to keep classified information out of those memos, limiting their contents to material that “as a private citizen, I felt free to share.” He added that he might have made them public sooner, but feared that it would be the President’s word against his. (Indeed, at a press conference on Friday, Trump said that he was willing to testify that Comey had lied under oath.) It was a Trump tweet, suggesting that the President might have taped their meetings, that prompted Comey to make his version public, because he thought that recordings

would corroborate his story. “Lordy, I hope there are tapes,” he told the committee.

If there are tapes, Robert Mueller, the Special Counsel, if not Congress, needs to get them to help determine if Trump obstructed justice. Whether such a finding would ever lead to a bill of impeachment, which requires a majority of votes in the House of Representatives, depends on the internal politics of the G.O.P. The 2018 midterms aren’t far off, though, and the sight of someone like James Comey calling the President a liar has the potential to rouse voters. In the meantime, more of Trump’s advisers and enablers may head for the door, or be shown out, but it is possible for a person to govern in isolation for quite a while, or at least to exploit the instruments of government, to fantastically disastrous effect. And Trump wouldn’t need much help with that.

—Amy Davidson

## MONUMENTS FACING HISTORY



When the city of New Orleans took down its last Confederate statue, of General Robert E. Lee, Representative Yvette Clarke, of New York’s Ninth Congressional District, had a local take. She tweeted, “We should do likewise with General Lee Avenue in Brooklyn.”

Clarke was referring to a street in Bay Ridge that is also named for the Confederate Army leader. Half a mile long, and two lanes wide, it is the main thoroughfare inside the U.S. Army garrison at Fort Hamilton, the city’s only active military base, which is fenced off from the surrounding neighborhood. All of the base’s streets are named for generals: Pershing Loop, for John Pershing; Marshall Drive, for George Marshall; Washington Drive, for George Washington. Lee served at Fort Hamilton in the Army Corps of Engineers from 1841 to 1846. This fact is memorialized on a boulder at the base’s entrance, which, an inscription notes, was installed by the New York

chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

For years, General Lee Avenue didn’t attract much attention. But in June, 2015, after a white supremacist shot nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Charleston, South Carolina, Brooklyn politicians began calling for the U.S. Army to rename it.

The name remained. But Clarke said last week that she hopes recent Confederate-statue removals will help her make a stronger case. “If you have a commitment in the Deep South to turn the page, why would we in Brooklyn commemorate Confederate Army generals?” she asked. She plans to have the Brooklyn congressional delegation co-author a letter to the Army secretary, to be sent on Monday, June 19th, or Juneteenth, the holiday celebrating the end of slavery.

General Lee Avenue is not the only Confederate memorial in Bay Ridge. Another can be found just a few blocks away, at St. John’s Episcopal Church, on Fort Hamilton Parkway. In the church’s front yard, there is a maple tree marked with an iron sign that reads, “This tree was planted by General Robert Edward Lee, while stationed at Fort Hamilton.” The sign was installed in 1912, also by the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

St. John’s Episcopal Church closed in

2015; there is a “For Sale” sign on its lawn. For years, it was known as “the Church of the Generals,” because of the military men who worshipped there. Lee was a vestryman. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, or U.D.C., still exists. It is a Virginia-based organization of women descended from Confederate soldiers or those who, according to its Web site, “gave Material Aid to the Cause.” The Southern Poverty Law Center defines the group as “neo-Confederates.” The U.D.C.’s New York chapter is now defunct, but it was prominent through the nineteen-sixties. Members threw galas around town, honoring Confederates and downplaying the Civil War’s connection to slavery.

According to a newspaper account from 1912, U.D.C. members learned about the Robert E. Lee tree through the church’s rector, who attended one of the group’s events at the Waldorf-Astoria. The tree had been damaged in a storm, and the U.D.C. persuaded the city to repair it. “Tree doctors and surgeons of the Park Department are at work today patching up the wounds of the giant Norway maple planted in the churchyard at St. John’s Episcopal Church, at Fort Hamilton Parkway and Ninety-sixth Street, in the early ’40s by Robert E. Lee, who later in life became the famous commander-in-chief of the Confederate

armies,” the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* reported. Today, a second, smaller plaque on the tree notes that it survived until 1935, when the U.D.C. planted the current maple as a replacement.

Asked about this memorial, Clarke said, “I’m not familiar with the Robert E. Lee tree.” But another Brooklyn politician was. “I know the tree,” Justin Brannan, the chief of staff for the outgoing city councilman Vincent J. Gentile, said. Brannan, who is running to replace Gentile, grew up nearby, on Shore Road. (Fans of New York’s underground punk scene may recognize him as a member of Indecision, the Bay Ridge hardcore band.) He had neighbors who attended the church. When it closed, he worked to have it listed as historic—though not because of the General Lee connection. “We basically didn’t want to see condos go up there,” he said. Brannan is against celebrating Confederates, whether with trees or street names.

At Goodfellows, a barbershop on Fourth Avenue, people knew the church but not the tree. “In the North? That seems strange,” a customer said.

Two residents walking their dogs—John Buonocore and Gregory Mulholland—knew the tree. “I’ve seen people point it out on tours,” Buonocore said.

Mulholland said that the church is notorious for other reasons: “People in the neighborhood, if they know it, it’s because years ago a priest working there got caught smoking crack in the rectory.”

Buonocore nodded. “The irony was there were A.A. meetings there.”

Mulholland went on, “And, before that, there was a priest who was murdered somewhere in South Jersey.” He shrugged. “But, anyway, that’s what people remember. That’s the history.”

—Robert Sullivan

## COMEBACK DEPT. PULVERIZER



“Left arm straight, head down,” Anthony Michael Hall murmured as he took his stance at the Chelsea Piers driving range. His 5-wood carved the air but only grazed the ball, which lolloped

gently over the Astro-Turf toward the Hudson River. Hall glared after it. “First of all, plant your fucking feet!” he told himself. “Turn your hips. Be the ball!” When his next shot boinged sideways into the protective netting, he cracked up. “My mother taught me that, to laugh at yourself,” he said. The actor, who goes by Michael, had arrived wearing an outfit that seemed to embody this precept: black suit, white sneakers, tomato-red T-shirt, Ninja Turtle-green backpack. “I’m not afraid of color,” he explained. “It’s my Italian side.”

Hall, who in the eighties personified



Anthony Michael Hall

dewy, dorky youth in such John Hughes films as “Sixteen Candles” and “The Breakfast Club,” is now forty-nine. Beneath his sweetly beseeching air lie unruly impulses, so that he calls to mind a security blanket atop an unmade bed. Yet after a checkered career that included a stint on “Saturday Night Live,” a drinking problem, a hit show called “The Dead Zone,” and various tabloid tussles, Hall is dynamite in the satirical film “War Machine,” now on Netflix. Brad Pitt stars as the cocksure general who commands the coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2009, a character based on Stanley McChrystal, and Hall co-stars as General Greg Pulver, a character based on McChrystal’s pal Michael Flynn, lately famous as the ex-national-security adviser whose loyalties may have extended to Russia and Turkey. Though Pulver is the command center’s director of intelligence, he neither collects nor exhibits any, being

a lump of profane seething, loyal only to Brad Pitt.

Hall switched to a driver and began to work up a sweat. The vehemence of his swings broke the ball reloader, and he had to hunt down an attendant. “I’m just a big, dumb Irishman,” he said apologetically as the man rebooted the system. “I’m at war with myself! No, not really. But sometimes!” He gave the tee a military salute, recognizing a valorous adversary, then hit a low but powerful slice. “There we go, baby!” he cried. “I think it was the wood. That’s what she said. Oh! Boom! If that net wasn’t there, the Lady Brett”—a yacht docked at the end of the pier—“would be in trouble!” This was arguable.

Hall said that “War Machine” was the greatest opportunity of his career: “Brad Pitt started calling me ‘the Pulverizer’ on set! What a goddam honor! I felt like Nathan Hale reporting to George Washington. Brad saw that I was a little too committed—committable, even—and he said, ‘Mike, it’s great to be prepared. But it’s also great to be open to surprises throughout the day.’ And I went, ‘O.K., that’s why you’re Brad Pitt and I’m not.’ It helped me be a deeper listener.”

He piped a shot down the middle and promptly quit, observing that Robert Downey, Jr., with whom he’s writing a sitcom, always says, “Don’t end stuck!” Over a Limonata at a nearby café, Hall pulled out a dog-eared copy of “The Operators,” the nonfiction Michael Hastings book about the conflict in Afghanistan that inspired “War Machine.” He pointed out the passage where Flynn is asked how he got his top-secret security clearance and says, “I lied.” The actor popped his eyes playfully and said, “The irony is what Flynn’s become, how he’s been vilified.” He mentioned the conspiracy theory that Hastings, who died in a car accident at the age of thirty-three, had been killed by the C.I.A.—then threw up his hands, semi-disowning the idea. “Politics, wow, who knows? I don’t know!” he cried, making the “zip it” motion. A second later, he went on, “I was rooting for the guy, and even in the dark satire we were doing I tried to show his deep patriotism. But you can see the truth in the eyes in politics, just like with an actor.”

His own eyes appealed for understanding as he recounted the stations of



his path. “John Hughes spoiled the shit out of me,” he said. “John laughed and cried at every take—I’m getting chills remembering it.” The hairs on his forearm stood erect, like little soldiers. “But I was an embryo on two pencil legs, and the things that work when you’re pubescent and cute don’t last.” Slugging down the rest of his soda, he continued, “I had an acting teacher who told me, ‘Michael, there are two types of actors: those who act with their ass’—squirmy Richard Dreyfuss types—and those who act with their balls.” His eyes got moist. “On this movie I got down on my knees and prayed before takes, and then just grabbed my balls and tried somehow to be of service.”

—*Tad Friend*

## PARIS POSTCARD SIDELINE



Michel Houellebecq was at home the other afternoon. He lives in an apartment in a nineteen-seventies high-rise in the Thirteenth Arrondissement of Paris, a neighborhood of efficiency hotels and Asian grocery stores. The welcome mat had an English bulldog on it. Houellebecq answered the door wearing a denim shirt and jeans—hiked up to a seemingly concave chest—and ushered a visitor inside, past a polka-dot shopping cart, some metal shelves stocked with bottled water, and a closet filled with three-ring binders. One had the feeling that Houellebecq, like a lot of his characters, might not get out much. His most recent novel, “Submission,” published in 2015, was in some ways a prophesy of the political upheavals of this year, but the line that came to mind was more prosaic: “To maintain order in your bureaucratic life, you more or less have to stay home.”

Houellebecq is an aesthete of mundanity. The deflated breast or the sad sprig of chervil never escapes his notice. He is also a photographer, who, last summer, showed his work in a solo exposition at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris. His first American exhibit,

“French Bashing,” recently opened at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery, on the Upper East Side. Houellebecq has visited New York perhaps four times. “I find it rather calm,” he said, sitting down with a bottle of Chablis at a wooden table in his living room (TV, recliner, lots of yellow). He was planning a return trip to attend the opening. “They’ve found me a hotel with a smoking room,” he said. He has no friends in the city, and mainly wanted to go on a helicopter tour.

Houellebecq was sixteen when he took his first photograph, of a river called le Grand Morin, in the Seine-et-Marne region of France, where he was brought up by his paternal grandmother. He wanted to capture the movements of the water. He uses two basic cameras—one digital, one film—without a zoom. “That simplifies things already,” he said, firing up a cigarette with a lighter that bore a picture of doughnuts. He was practically whispering. The art world, he said, was a mystery, full of rich people and smooth relationships. “Literature is a lot more mainstream,” he added. “The pro of that is that you don’t have the impression that what you do is in vain. The con is that you’re forced to do dumb stuff. Dumb TV shows. Particularly in France, where writers are as well known as actors.”

Houellebecq has acted, too (most recently he played the dour owner of a bed-and-breakfast patronized by Gérard Depardieu). The sense of social decay that pervades his novels is visi-

ble in his photographs. The most bitterly amusing of them features a piece of public art—a set of weather-beaten concrete letters spelling “EUROPE”—in front of a bleak supermarket parking lot. (It was taken years ago outside a Carrefour in Calais, where Houellebecq had gone to attend the opening of the Channel Tunnel. He ended up skipping the ceremony, because he wasn’t getting along with an official from the Culture Ministry.) “I don’t take pictures of human beings, because I prefer literature for describing a human being,” he said. “And I don’t do much description of the landscape in my books, because I find that a photo is better.” He must have been chewing on his cigarette, because it hung from his mouth like a broken limb. He went to get another bottle of wine. When he returned, he admitted that he found it impossible to write about landscapes.

“For most people, it’s sex,” his visitor said.

“No, that I’m pretty good at.”

In “Submission,” Houellebecq imagines a French Presidential election in which the two major parties have collapsed; Marine Le Pen is running against the head of a newly formed party who draws support from the weakened ranks of the Socialists (in this case, he’s a traditionalist Muslim who wants to expand the E.U. to include North Africa). “I get most of my political news from television programs,” Houellebecq said. “I love ‘Borgen,’” the Danish political drama. Although he didn’t vote—he has said that, out of principle, he votes only in referendums—he’d always believed that Emmanuel Macron would win. “He’s very talented, but I’m waiting to see,” Houellebecq said, adding that Macron’s psychology struck him as “less bizarre than Sarkozy’s.” Of Brigitte Trogneux, Macron’s wife, he said, “She’s a little bit his mother, but in the Greek sense—an *iniatrice* to the world.”

The living room, which is also Houellebecq’s writing room, was full of grammar books and dictionaries. The art on the walls was limited to a few animal paintings. “I bought them from a guy who only paints his dog,” Houellebecq said. He said that he didn’t know whether his photographs would

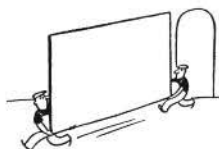


*Michel Houellebecq*

be for sale in New York. (They are; prices range from around five thousand to more than twenty thousand dollars.) "In principle, no," he said. "I took a tourist visa, so I'm not supposed to earn any money during my trip."

—Lauren Collins

## ART'S SAKE DEPT. INCIDENTS

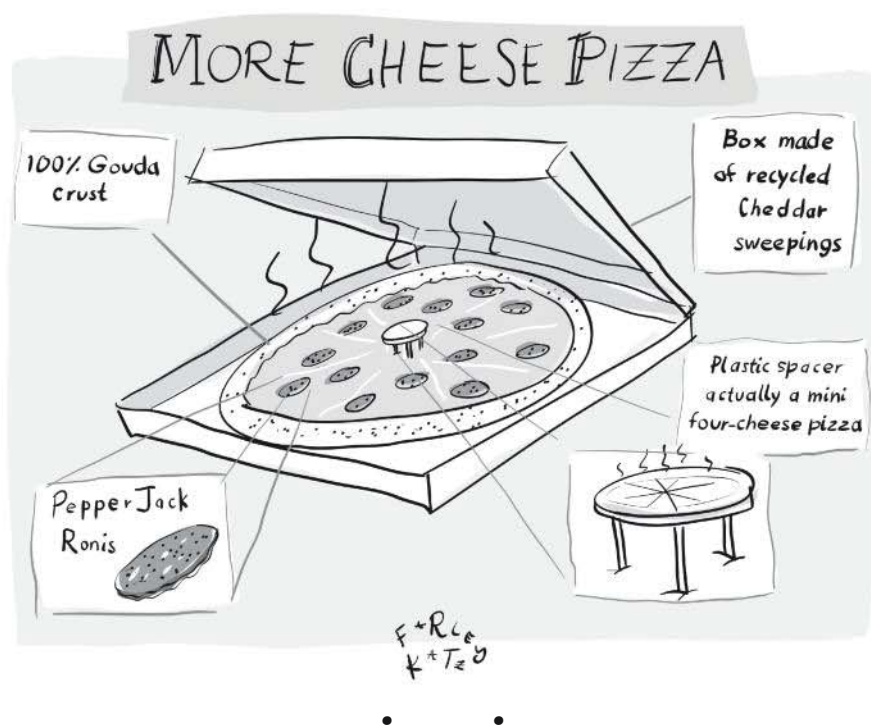


The artist James Turrell has never been in a hurry. Now seventy-four, with white hair, a white mustache, and a white Mosaic beard, he has spent the past forty years rearranging a defunct volcano in the Arizona desert. Called Roden Crater, the project is still at least five years from completion. Construction, so far, has involved moving more than a million cubic yards of earth. "I'm much more the tortoise than the hare," Turrell said the other day.

Turrell was visiting the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in North Adams, which was about to open a new wing featuring nine of his works. These were nothing on the scale of Roden Crater, but still, as art works go they were large and unusually complicated. Turrell was fine-tuning one, an apartment-size piece titled "Perfectly Clear." In front of him, a set of stairs led up to a rectangular opening cut into a wall. Beyond the opening was an empty chamber. Lights installed in the walls of the chamber were making it glow different shades—first fuchsia, then baby blue, then electric yellow. Everything outside the chamber also kept changing color, including Turrell.

One of Turrell's associates, Ryan Pike, was tapping on a laptop that controlled the lights. At times, the chamber seemed to vanish, and it looked as if the opening had become a wall of radiant color. At other points, the chamber reappeared, and its back wall became visible. At still other points, the lights strobed and a sort of psychedelic plaid pattern appeared across the opening.

"We're not getting much printout with this one," Turrell told Pike, who tapped away more vigorously.



"Generally, we don't see light this way, because we see light illuminating things," Turrell said. "But my interest is in the thingness, the physicality, of light itself." Other works of his on display include an illuminated diamond that, depending on one's perspective, looks like a cutout or a pyramid, and a ten-and-a-half-foot-wide lozenge of light that seems to pulsate as its colors shift.

Late in the afternoon, MASS MOCA's director, Joe Thompson, wandered by. Thompson, who is fifty-eight, is almost as much of a tortoise as Turrell. He'd first started talking to the artist about exhibiting his works back in 1987, at which point the museum wasn't yet a museum. (MASS MOCA occupies a sprawling brick complex that was used first to print textiles and then, later, to make electronics.)

"He was describing how this was going to be," Turrell said. "And I thought, You know, that would be terrific, but it's going to be an unbelievable amount of work." Thompson laughed ruefully.

The conversation turned to artistic mishaps. In 1980, a woman mistook a wall of light in a Turrell work that was on display at the Whitney Museum for an actual, physical wall. Trying to lean against it, she fell and sprained her wrist. She sued for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. During the

trial, Turrell related, he'd said that he considered himself the aggrieved party, as obviously the woman had been "facing the art ass first." (The case was eventually settled out of court.)

Thompson countered with a story about a MASS MOCA visitor who sat down on a Robert Rauschenberg work that looked solid but was in fact a trough of water. The trough was surrounded by neon lights, which shattered as the visitor tumbled in. "She's lucky she didn't get electrocuted," he said.

Turrell came back with a tale about a woman who plunged into one of his works at a Venice Biennale. "I have had some incidents," he observed.

"Perfectly Clear" presents its own hazards, and so Thompson had had a pair of railings installed on the stairs leading up to the white chamber. Turrell hated them. When, on an earlier site visit, the artist saw the arrangement for the first time, Thompson recalled, "I could feel him trying to come to grips with these damn handrails. It was not going well. He looked at me and said, 'If this were thirty years ago, this would be a battle to the end.'"

Turrell said that he still thought the railings were awful but he was no longer interested in fighting. "Oh, I'm just a marshmallow," he said.

—Elizabeth Kolbert



## THE INVENTION OF SEX

*St. Augustine's carnal knowledge.*

BY STEPHEN GREENBLATT



One day in 370 C.E., a sixteen-year-old boy and his father went to the public baths together in the provincial city of Thagaste, in what is now Algeria. At some point during their visit, the father may have glimpsed that the boy had an involuntary erection, or simply remarked on his recently sprouted pubic hair. Hardly a world-historical event, but the boy was named Augustine, and he went on to shape Christian theology for both Roman Catholics and Protestants, to explore the hidden recesses of the inner life, and to bequeath to all of us the conviction that there is something fundamentally damaged about the entire human species. There has prob-

ably been no more important Western thinker in the past fifteen hundred years.

In the “Confessions,” written around 397, Augustine described what happened in the bathhouse many years earlier. That day, Patricius, his father, saw in him the signs of *inquieta adulescentia*, restless young manhood, and was—in Sarah Ruden’s new, strikingly colloquial translation—“over the moon” at the thought of someday soon having grandchildren. It is easy, even across a vast distance in time, to conjure up a teenager’s exquisite embarrassment. But what fixed itself in Augustine’s memory, instead, is something that happened when they got home: “In his glee he told my

mother—it was the sort of tipsy glee in which this sorry world has forgotten you, its creator, and fallen in love instead with something you’ve created.” (Augustine’s “Confessions” are addressed to his God.) His mother, Monica, was a pious Christian and responded very differently. Since God had already started to build his temple in her breast, she “endured a violent spasm of reverent, tremulous trepidation.” The unbaptized adolescent’s sexual maturity had become the occasion—not the first and certainly not the last—for a serious rift between his parents.

Patricius did not concern himself with his son’s spiritual development in the light of Jesus, nor did he regard the evidence of his son’s virility with anything but delight. In response, Monica set out to drive a wedge between son and father. “She made a considerable bustle,” Augustine writes, admiringly, “to ensure that you, my God, were my father, rather than him.”

About one thing the father and mother agreed: their brilliant son should obtain the education his gifts deserved. The young Augustine had been sent to study in the pleasant town of Madauros and had shown remarkable facility in literary interpretation and performance. The university at Carthage seemed within reach—followed, possibly, by a lucrative career in law or public speaking. Patricius, a man of modest means, scrimped and networked for a year to collect the needed funds. When Augustine left Thagaste, he must have seen his father for the last time, for in the “Confessions” he mentions that when he was seventeen Patricius died. The mention is a conspicuously cool one.

If the grieving widow also felt some relief at his death—given that he was a dangerous influence on her beloved son—any hopes she might have had that Augustine would embark at once on the path of chastity were quickly dashed. “I came to Carthage,” he writes, “to the center of a skillet where outrageous love affairs hissed all around me.” His confession that he polluted “the shared channel of friendship with putrid rutting” sounds like an overheated account of masturbation or homosexuality; other, equally intense and equally cryptic phrases evoke a succession of

*Poring over the story of Adam and Eve, Augustine came up with original sin.*

unhappy affairs with women. The feverish promiscuity, if that is what it was, resolved fairly quickly into something quite stable. Within a year or two, Augustine had settled down with a woman with whom he lived and to whom, in his account, he was faithful for the next fourteen years.

The arrangement was probably the best that Monica could have envisaged at this stage for her son, given his restless sexual energies. What she most feared was a hasty marriage that might hinder his career. Merely living with a woman posed much less of a threat, even when the woman gave birth to a son, Adeodatus. By the standards of the time, the relationship was a respectable one. At least from Augustine's perspective—and that is the only perspective we have—there was no thought of his marrying the woman, whose name he does not even bother to provide. He expects his readers to understand the difference “between the sanctioned scope of marriage, a bond contracted for the purpose of producing children, and a deal arising from lustful infatuation.”

Priding himself on his intelligence and his literary sensitivity, he studied law; he honed his rhetorical skills; he entered dramatic competitions; he consulted astrologers; he mastered the complex, sinuous system of thought associated with the Persian cult known as Manichaeism. Augustine carried his Manichaeism, along with his mistress and his son, from Carthage to Thagaste, where he taught literature, and then back to Carthage, where he gave courses on public speaking, and then to Milan, where he took up an illustrious professorship of rhetoric.

In Augustine's decade-long ascent, there was one major problem, and her name was Monica. When he arrived at Thagaste for his first teaching position, Augustine's mother was loath to share a house with him, not because of his mistress and child but, rather, because of his Manichaean beliefs. Those beliefs—the conviction that there were two forces, one good and the other evil, at war in the universe—were repugnant to her, and she made a conspicuous show of weeping bitterly, as if her son had died.

Her tears were redoubled when, back at Carthage, he prepared to leave for

Rome: “She was hanging onto me coercively, trying to either stop my journey or come along with me on it.” Lying, he told her that he was only seeing off a friend, and persuaded her to spend the night at a shrine near the harbor. “I got away, and got away with it.”

The son must have felt some guilt. And yet, in remembering this moment, he allowed himself for once to express some anger toward his mother: “Her longing, which was physical, was taking a beating from the justified whip of sorrow.” The phrase Augustine uses for this longing—*carnale desiderium*—might seem more appropriate for a lover than for a mother. Monica had taken whatever was blocked or unsatisfied in her relationship with her husband and transferred it to her son. Augustine, suffocating, had to flee. And the suffering that his escape visited upon her was, he reflects, her due as a woman: “these tortures revealed the vestiges of Eve she had within her, as with groans she searched for what she had given birth to with groans.”

In Genesis, the consequence of Eve's disobedience is twofold: women are condemned to bring forth children in pain and to yearn for the husbands who dominate them. As Augustine looks back at his relation to his mother, child and husband are merged in him: she brought him with sorrow into the world and she sought him with sorrow through the world. For his grieving mother's search for her son did not end at the harbor in Carthage. A few years later, when Augustine took up his post in Milan, Monica sailed from North Africa to join him.

This time, he did not flee. Though he was not ready to be baptized a Catholic, he told his mother that he had been deeply impressed by Ambrose, the Catholic bishop of Milan. Ambrose's powerful sermons helped to undermine Augustine's contempt for the apparent crudeness of the Bible's stories. What had originally struck him as absurdities began to seem like profound mysteries. His long-held intellectual and aesthetic certainties were crumbling.

All the while, Augustine's career continued on its course. He met his students in the morning, and spent his afternoons with his close friends, discussing philosophy. His mother, now

settled in his household, sought to change her son's life. She busied herself with arranging a favorable marriage, and found a suitable Catholic heiress whose parents agreed to the match. The girl was almost two years shy of marriageable age, though, and so the wedding had to wait.

In the meantime, Monica engineered another change in her son's life. The woman with whom he had been living “was torn from my side, because she was supposed to be an obstacle to my marriage,” Augustine writes. “My heart, which had fused with hers, was mutilated by the wound, and I limped along trailing blood.” Of his mistress's feelings, he gives us no glimpse, noting simply, “She went back to Africa, vowing to you that she would never know another man.” Then she is gone from his account, leaving him with the gnawing sexual appetite that she had served to appease. He quickly took another mistress.

Yet, as he soon came to testify, God's grace works in strange ways. In little more than a year's time, Augustine had converted to the Catholic faith. Shortly thereafter, now baptized, he broke off his engagement to marry, resigned his professorship, vowed himself to perpetual chastity, and determined to return to Africa and found a monastic community. By running away from his mother, he had, without realizing it, embarked on a spiritual journey that would surpass her utmost dreams.

Characteristically, he was able to embrace Lady Continence, as he put it, only in the context of a much larger rethinking of the nature of sexuality. He needed to understand the peculiar intensity of arousal, compulsive urgency, pleasure, and pain that characterizes the human fulfillment of desire. He was not looking back on these feelings from the safe perch of a diminished libido, or deluding himself that they were abnormal. As a young man who had already fathered a child, he knew that, for the entire human species, reproduction entailed precisely the sexual intercourse that he was bent on renouncing. How could the highest Christian religious vocation reject something so obviously natural? In the course of answering this question, Augustine came to articulate a profoundly influential and still controversial vision of sexuality, one that he reached



not only by plumbing his deepest experiences but also by projecting himself back into the remotest human past.

In the Roman port of Ostia, a few days before setting sail for Africa, Augustine and his mother were standing by a window that looked out onto an enclosed garden, and talking intimately. Their conversation, serene and joyful, led them to the conclusion that no bodily pleasure, no matter how great, could ever match the happiness of the saints. And then, “stretching upward with a more fiery emotion,” Augustine and Monica experienced something remarkable: they felt themselves climbing higher and higher, through all the degrees of matter and through the heavenly spheres and, higher still, to the region of their own souls and up toward the eternity that lies beyond time itself. And “while we were speaking and panting for it, with a thrust that required all the heart’s strength, we brushed against it slightly.”

It is difficult to convey in translation the power of the account, and of what it meant for the thirty-two-year-old son and the fifty-five-year-old mother to reach this climax together. Then it was over: *suspiravimus*. “We sighed,” Augustine writes, and returned to the sound of their speech.

The moment of ecstasy that Augustine and his mother shared was the most intense experience in his life—perhaps, as Rebecca West remarked, “the most intense experience ever commemorated.” A few days later, Monica fell ill, and died soon after. The “Confessions” does not take the story of Augustine’s life further. Instead, it turns to a philosophical meditation on memory and an interpretation of the opening of Genesis, as if that were where his whole autobiography had been heading. Why Genesis? And why, in the years that followed, did his attention come to focus particularly on the story of Adam and Eve?

Pagans ridiculed that story as primitive and ethically incoherent. How could a god worthy of respect try to keep humans from the knowledge of good and evil? Jews and Christians of any sophistication preferred not to dwell upon it or distanced themselves by treating it as an allegory. For Philo, a Greek-speaking Jew in first-century Alexandria, the first

human—the human of the first chapter of Genesis—was not a creature of flesh and blood but a Platonic idea. For Origen, a third-century Christian, Paradise was not a place but a condition of the soul.

The archaic story of the naked man and woman, the talking snake, and the magical trees was something of an embarrassment. It was Augustine who rescued it from the decorous oblivion to which it seemed to be heading. He bears principal responsibility for its prominence, including the fact that four in ten Americans today profess to believe in its literal truth. During the more than forty years that succeeded his momentous conversion—years of endless controversy and the wielding of power and feverish writing—he persuaded himself that it was no mere fable or myth. It was the key to everything.

He brought to his interpretation not only his philosophical acumen but also memories that reached back decades—to the signs of *inquieta adolescentia* that made his father babble excitedly to his wife about grandchildren. Through a sustained reflection on Adam and Eve, Augustine came to understand that what was crucial in his experience was not the budding of sexual maturity but, rather, its unquiet, involuntary character. More than fifty years later, he was still brooding on this fact. Other parts of the body are in our power, if we are healthy, to move or not to move as we wish. “But when it must come to man’s



great function of the procreation of children,” he writes, “the members which were expressly created for this purpose will not obey the direction of the will, but lust has to be waited for to set these members in motion, as if it had legal right over them.”

How weird it is, Augustine thought, that we cannot simply command this crucial part of the body. We become aroused, and the arousal is within us—it is in this sense fully ours—and yet it

is not within the executive power of our will. Obviously, the model here is the male body, but he was certain that women must have some equivalent experience, not visible but essentially identical. That is why, in the wake of their transgression, both the first woman and the first man felt shame and covered themselves.

Augustine returned again and again to the same set of questions: Whose body is this, anyway? Where does desire come from? Why am I not in command of my own penis? “Sometimes it refuses to act when the mind wills, while often it acts against its will!” Even the aged monk in his cell, Augustine acknowledges, in “Against Julian,” is tormented by “disquieting memories” crowding in upon “chaste and holy intentions.” Nor can the most pious married couple get anywhere “without the ardor of lust.”

And this ardor, to which Augustine gives the technical name “concupiscence,” was not simply a natural endowment or a divine blessing; it was a touch of evil. What a married man and woman who intend to beget a child do together is not evil, Augustine insisted; it is good. “But the action is not performed without evil.” True, sexual intercourse—as Augustine knew from long experience with his mistress and others—is the greatest bodily pleasure. But the surpassing intensity of pleasure is precisely its dangerous allure, its sweet poison: “Surely any friend of wisdom and holy joys...would prefer, if possible, to beget children without lust.”

Augustine’s tortured recognition that involuntary arousal was an inescapable presence—not only in conjugal love-making but also in what he calls the “very movements which it causes, to our sorrow, even in sleep, and even in the bodies of chaste men”—shaped his most influential idea, one that transformed the story of Adam and Eve and weighed down the centuries that followed: *originale peccatum*, original sin.

This idea became one of the cornerstones of Christian orthodoxy—but not before decades of dispute. Chief among those who found it both absurd and repulsive was a British-born monk, Pelagius. Almost exactly Augustine’s contemporary, he was in a certain sense his secret sharer: an upstart from the margins of the Roman world who by force of intellect, charisma, and ambition made

his way to the great capital and had a significant impact upon the empire's spiritual life.

Pelagius and his followers were moral optimists. They believed that human beings were born innocent. Infants do not enter the world with a special endowment of virtue, but neither do they carry the innate stain of vice. True, we are all descendants of Adam and Eve, and we live in a world rife with the consequences of their primordial act of disobedience. But that act in the distant past does not condemn us inescapably to sinfulness. How could it? What would be the mechanism of infection? Why would a benevolent God permit something so monstrous? We are at liberty to shape our own lives, whether to serve God or to serve Satan.

Augustine countered that we are all marked, in our very origins, with evil. It is not a matter of particular acts of cruelty or violence, specific forms of social pathology, or this or that person who has made a disastrous choice. It is hopelessly shallow and naïve to think, as the Pelagians do, that we begin with a blank slate or that most of us are reasonably decent or that we have it in our power to choose good. There is something deeply, essentially wrong with us. Our whole species is what Augustine called a *massa peccati*, a mass of sin.

The Pelagians said that Augustine was simply reverting to the old Manichaean belief that the flesh was the creation and the possession of a wicked force. Surely this was a betrayal of Christianity, with its faith in a Messiah who became flesh. Not so, Augustine responded. It is true that God chose to become man, but he did this “of a virgin, whose conception, not flesh but spirit, not lust but faith, preceded.” Jesus’ existence, in other words, did not depend upon the minutest touch of that ardor through which all other human beings are generated: “Holy virginity became pregnant, not by conjugal intercourse, but by faith—lust being utterly absent—so that that which was born from the root of the first man might derive only the origin of race, not also of guilt.”

The crucial word here is “guilt,” *crimen*. That we are not untouched by lust is our fault—not the result of God’s will but the consequence of something that we have done. It is here, when Augus-



tine must produce evidence of our individual and collective perfidy, that he called in witness Adam and Eve. For the original sin that stains every one of us is not only a sin that inheres in our individual origins—that is, in the sexual arousal that enabled our parents to conceive us—but also a sin that may be traced back to the couple in whom our whole race originates. And now, in order to protect God from the charge that He was responsible for the innate defects in His creation, everything depended on Augustine somehow showing that in Paradise it could all have been otherwise; that our progenitors Adam and Eve were not originally designed to reproduce as we now reproduce but that they perversely made the wrong choice, a choice in which we all participate. To do this, Augustine would have to burrow into the enigmatic words of Genesis more deeply than anyone had done before. He would have to reconstruct the lost lives of our remote ancestors. He would have to find his way back to the Garden of Eden and watch our first parents making love.

The way forward, he became convinced, was first and foremost to take the words of Genesis as literally true. The Hebrew origin story might seem like a folktale, of the sort he had looked down on when he was a young man. But the task of the true believer was not to treat it as the naïve covering of a sophisticated philosophical mystery. The task was to take it as the unvarnished representation of historical truth—to make it real—and to persuade others to take it that way as well.

Plunging into the project with characteristic confidence, Augustine embarked on a work, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” that aimed at discussing “the scriptures according to their proper meaning of what actually happened.” For some fifteen years, he labored on this work, resisting the urgings of his friends to complete it and make it public. Of all his many books, it was probably the one to which he devoted the most prolonged and sustained attention.

In the end, it defeated him, and he knew it. The problem is that not every



word of Genesis can be taken literally, however much one tries, and there is no simple, reliable rule for the appropriate degree of literal-mindedness. The Bible tells us that after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit “the eyes of both of them were opened.” Does this mean that they had been made with eyes sealed shut “and left to wander about blind in the paradise of delights, feeling their way, and so to reach and touch all unawares the forbidden tree too, and on feeling the prohibited fruits to pick some without knowing it”? No, it cannot possibly mean this, for we have already learned that the animals were brought to Adam, who must have seen them before he named them; and we have been told that Eve saw that the fatal tree was good for eating “and pleasing to the eye.” Still, Augustine reflects, just because one word or phrase is used metaphorically, “it does not mean that the whole passage is to be taken in a figurative sense.”

But how do you know? How did Eve know what the serpent meant when he said, to tempt her, “Your eyes will be opened”? It is not as if the stakes were low. For Augustine, at least, they could not have been higher: it was a matter of life or death, not only for the first parents but also for all their descendants. And yet there is no fixed rule for interpretation: “the writer of the book,” Augustine writes, “allowed readers to decide for themselves.”

Small wonder that Augustine took so long to write “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” and that, whenever he could put his hands on it, he clung like a drowning man to the literal sense. In the case of “Your eyes will be opened,” he was certain that there must have been, after all, something that the couple actually saw for the first time after their transgression, something not merely metaphorical: “They turned their eyes on their own genitals, and lusted after them with that stirring movement they had not previously known.”

The key to this understanding had been hidden all along in Augustine’s own experience. The *inquieta adolescentia* that delighted the adolescent’s father and horrified his mother could now be traced all the way back to the original moment when Adam and Eve felt both lust and shame. They saw for the first time what they had never seen before, and, if the

sight aroused them, it also impelled them to reach for the fig leaves to cover as with a veil “that which was put into motion without the will of those who wished it.” Until this moment, they had possessed—for the only time, Augustine thought, in the whole history of the human race—perfect freedom. Now, because they had spontaneously, inexplicably, and proudly chosen to live not for God but for themselves, they had lost their freedom. And they were ashamed.

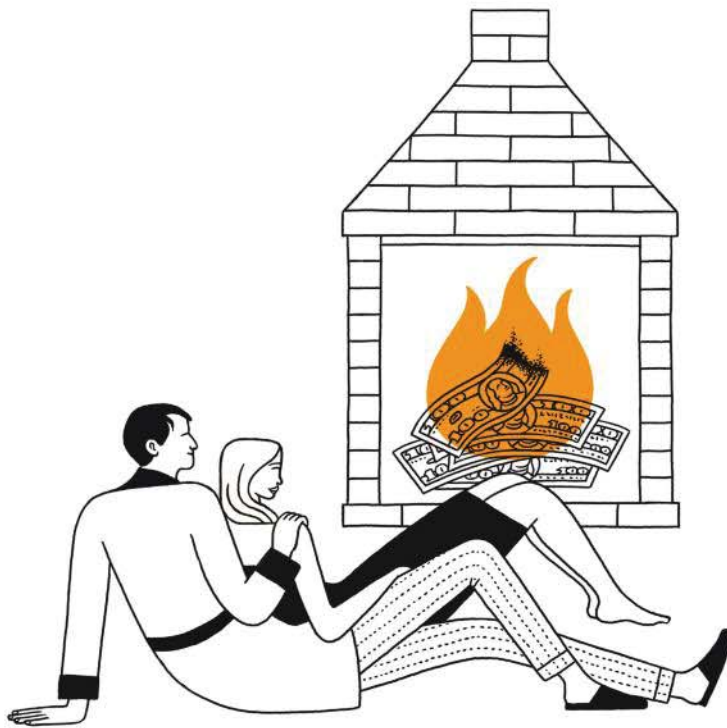
But what was the alternative that they—and we—lost forever? How, specifically, were they meant to reproduce, if it was not in the way that all humans have done for as long as anyone can remember? In Paradise, Augustine argued, Adam and Eve would have had sex without involuntary arousal: “They would not have had the activity of turbulent lust in their flesh, however, but only the movement of peaceful will by which we command the other members of the body.” Without feeling any passion—without sensing that strange goad—“the husband would have relaxed on his wife’s bosom in tranquility of mind.”

How would this have been possible, the Pelagians asked, if the bodies of Adam and Eve were substantially the same as our bodies? Just consider, Augustine replied, that even now, in our current condition, some people can do things with their bodies that others find impossible. “Some people can even move their ears, either one at a time or both together.” Others, as he personally had witnessed, could sweat whenever they chose, and there were even people who could “produce at will such musical sounds from their behind (without any stink) that they seem to be singing from that region.” So why should we not imagine that Adam, in his uncorrupted state, could have quietly willed his penis to stiffen, just enough to enter Eve? It all would have been so calm that the seed could have been “dispatched into the womb, with no loss of the wife’s integrity, just as the menstrual flux can now be produced from the womb of a virgin without loss of maidenhead.” And for the man, too, there would have been “no impairment of his body’s integrity.”

This was how it was all meant to be for Adam and Eve. But, Augustine concludes, it never happened, not even once.

Their sin happened first, “and they incurred the penalty of exile from paradise before they could unite in the task of propagation as a deliberate act undisturbed by passion.” So what was the point of this whole exercise of trying to imagine their sex life? It was bound up with Christian polemic and Christian doctrine—with an attempt to refute the Manichaeans and the Pelagians and with a vision of Jesus as the miraculous child of a virgin who became pregnant without the experience of ardor. Along with these doctrinal purposes, Augustine’s obsessive engagement with the story of Adam and Eve spoke to something in his life. What he discovered—or, more truthfully, invented—about sex in Paradise proved to him that humans were not originally meant to feel whatever it was that he experienced as an adolescent and afterward. It proved to him that he was not meant to feel the impulses that drew him to the fleshpots of Carthage. Above all, it proved to him that he, at least in the redeemed state for which he longed, was not meant to feel what he had felt again and again with his mistress: the mother of his only child; the woman he sent away at his mother’s behest; the one who declared that she would never be with another man, as he would never be with another woman; the one whose separation from him felt, he wrote, like something ripped from his side.

Adam had fallen, Augustine wrote in “The City of God,” not because the serpent had deceived him. He chose to sin, and, in doing so, he lost Paradise, because he could not endure being severed from his sole companion. Augustine had, as best he could within the limits of his fallen condition, undone Adam’s fatal choice. With the help of his sainted mother, he had severed himself from his companion and had tried to flee from ardor, from arousal. He had fashioned himself, to the best of his extraordinary abilities, on the model of the unfallen Adam, a model he had struggled for many years to understand and to explicate. True, he still had those involuntary dreams, those unwelcome stirrings, but what he knew about Adam and Eve in their state of innocence reassured him that someday, with Jesus’ help, he would have total control over his own body. He would be free. ♦



## JARED & IVANKA'S GUIDE TO MINDFUL MARRIAGE

BY PAUL RUDNICK

Now that Ivanka's "Women Who Work" is a best-seller and Jared has begun brokering arms deals in the Middle East, we've decided to expand our horizons even further. We'd like to invite couples everywhere to join us on our journey of love, personal fulfillment, and gratitude. Here are some tips:

1. Never go to bed poor.
2. Sometimes we like to imagine that we're just regular people, without all the branding, limelight, and hoopla. We picture ourselves strolling into a small-town bake sale or pancake breakfast, shaking hands with everyone, and saying, "Hi. It's great to be here. We're the Madoffs."
3. Jared asked his dad for the secrets to a lasting and happy marriage. Mr. Kushner looked thoughtful and replied, "Never take your spouse for

granted. Never forget a birthday or an anniversary. And never hire a prostitute to entrap your brother-in-law." Words to love by.

4. If, during the courtship phase, your potential spouse asks you to convert to Judaism, your first response should be an adorable pout. Then, to appease him, attend a matinée of "Fiddler on the Roof" and remark, "Those dancing Jewish villagers are so graceful, even after a heavy meal." If your potential in-laws become insistent, try reasoning: "Jewish or Presbyterian, don't we all place dusty aluminum Christmas trees and plastic menorahs in the lobbies of the apartment buildings we own, except for the more neglected properties in Jersey and the outer boroughs?" If religion threatens to become a deal breaker, tell yourself, "You know, being Jew-

ish might be fun, and could inspire a new signature fragrance called Oyvanka."

5. Family is everything. We treasure the special moments, like the time our kids used their crayons to make Jared a construction-paper subpoena. We have game nights, when we play such favorites as Pin the Tail on Whoever's Out of Favor, Let's Dress Jeff Sessions in Doll Clothes, and Who Can Hug Mommy Without Touching Her Hair?
6. We like to leave romantic Post-its for each other on our bathroom mirrors, with notes like "You're my person of interest," "Tonight I want you to wear your navy blazer, crisp white shirt, khakis, Weejuns, bulletproof vest—and nothing else," and "I'd like to trademark our love and sell it to the Chinese."
7. Love isn't about money, influence, or pretending to walk in slow motion together across the White House lawn. It's about glancing across a crowded reception at the other person, and smiling shyly, because both of you know that nobody can even remember who Eric or Donald, Jr., is married to.
8. Last week, we had a fun picnic with Paul Ryan and his family. We grinned as we watched Paul grab food from his kids and warn them, "You'd better not start crying or I'll take one of your shoes."
9. Since we're both from legendary real-estate dynasties, our Monopoly set includes hundreds of extra "Get Out of Jail Free" cards.
10. It's the smallest gestures that mean the most, like getting special rabbinical permission to take a private jet to Saudi Arabia on the Sabbath, or turning out all the lights and giggling until Steve Bannon stops ringing the doorbell and slinks away. Sometimes we just sit quietly by the fire, holding hands while sharing the same thought: If Melania and Donald ever tried this, she'd smack him so hard that he'd gargle with Purell. ♦



PERSONAL HISTORY

# WHY AREN'T YOU LAUGHING?

*Reckoning with addiction.*

BY DAVID SEDARIS



*The author (rear) with his sister Lisa and their mother, Sharon Sedaris.*

From the outside, our house on the North Carolina coast—the Sea Section—is nothing much to look at. It might have been designed by a ten-year-old with a ruler, that’s how basic it is: walls, roof, windows, deck. It’s easy to imagine the architect putting down his crayon and shouting into the next room, “I’m done. Can I watch TV now?”

Whenever I denigrate the place, Hugh reminds me that it’s the view that counts: the ocean we look out at. I see his point, but it’s not like you have to limit yourself to one or the other. “What about our place in Sussex!” I say. From the outside, our cottage in England resembles something you’d find in a storybook—a home for pot-

bellied trolls, benevolent ones that smoke pipes. Built of stone in the late sixteenth century, it has a pitched roof and little windows with panes the size of playing cards. We lie in bed and consider sheep grazing in the shadow of a verdant down. I especially love being there in the winter, so it bothered me when I had to spend most of January and February working in the United States. Hugh came along, and toward the end we found ourselves on Maui, where I had a reading. I’d have been happy just to fly in and fly out, but Hugh likes to swim in the ocean, so we stayed for a week in a place he found online.

“Let me guess,” the box-office manager of the theatre I performed at said.

“It’s spread out over at least four levels and panelled in dark wood, like something you’d see on a nineteen-seventies TV show, right?”

He’d hit it squarely on the nose, especially the dark part. The wood on the interior walls had been rigorously stained, and was almost the color of fudge, a stark contrast to the world outside, which was relentlessly, almost oppressively bright. As for the various levels, any excuse seemed to have been taken to add stairs, even if only two or three. If you lived there full time, you’d no doubt get the hang of them. As it was, I tripped or fell down at least twice a day. The house reminded me of the condominium units my family used to rent on Emerald Isle when I was in my twenties, though none of those had a crucifix hanging in the kitchen. This one was ten inches tall, and supported a slender, miserable Christ plated in bronze.

That was the only decoration aside from a number of framed photo collages of the owner and his family taken over the years. They were a good-looking group, one that multiplied as the children grew and had kids of their own. The color in the earlier snapshots had faded, just as it has in pictures of my own family: same haircuts, same flared slacks and shirts with long droopy collars, only now drained of their vibrancy, like lawns in winter. Each generation looked healthy and prosperous, yet I found myself wondering what lurked beneath the surface—for surely there was something. “Which of you is in prison now?” I’d ask, glancing up as I tripped on the stairs to the bedroom.

The house was on the ocean, and the beach that began where the back yard ended was shaded with palms. Most often it was deserted, so, aside from a few short trips up the coast for supplies, Hugh stayed put during our week on Maui. If he wasn’t on the deck overlooking the water, he was in the water looking back at the deck. He saw whales and sea turtles. He snorkeled. My only accomplishment was to sign my name to five thousand blank sheets of paper sent by my publisher. “Tip-ins,” they’re called. A month or two down the line, they’d be bound into copies of the book I had just about

finished. There were still another few weeks to make changes, but they could be only minor grammatical things. Hugh, who is good at spotting typos and used to do so for his father, a novelist, was reading the manuscript for the first time. Whenever I heard him laugh, I'd ask, "What's so funny?" Should five or ten minutes pass with no reaction, I'd call out, "Why aren't you laughing?"

It takes quite a while to sign your name five thousand times, and so I set myself a daily goal, and would stop whatever I was doing every two hours and pick up my Magic Marker. Often, while autographing, I'd listen to the radio or watch a TV show I like called "Intervention." In it, real-life alcoholics and drug addicts are seen going about their business. Most are too far gone to hold down jobs, so mainly we see them starting fights, crying on unmade beds, and shooting up in hard-to-spot places like the valleys between their toes. Amazing, to me, is that anyone would allow him or herself to be filmed in this condition. "Did you catch me on TV?" I imagine them saying to their friends. "Wasn't it incredible when I shit on that car!"

That's what a thirty-one-year-old drunk woman did in one of the episodes I watched as I signed blank sheets of paper: pulled down her pants, positioned herself just so, and defecated on the rear bumper of a parked Audi A4. As she went at it—a diamond shape blurring her from the waist down—I thought of my mother, in part because she was a lady. By this, I mean that she never wore pants, just skirts and dresses. She never left the house without makeup on and her hair styled. Whenever I see a young woman boarding a plane in her pajamas, or a guy in a T-shirt that reads, "Your Hole Is My Goal," I always wonder what Mom would think.

She's been dead since 1991, so she missed a lot of the buildup to what is now thought of as less than scandalous behavior. I once watched a show in which a group of young men were sent out to collect pubic hair. It was a contest of sorts, and in the end the loser had to put all the spoils on a pizza and eat it. That was in 2003, so, to me, someone on television shitting on a

car—*Sure. O.K. That makes sense.* To go there straight from "Murder, She Wrote," however, would be quite a shock.

Another reason "Intervention" makes me think about my mother is that she was an alcoholic. It's a hard word to use for someone you love, and so my family avoided it. Rather, we'd whisper, among ourselves, that Mom "had a problem," that she "could stand to cut back."

Sober, she was cheerful and charismatic, the kind of person who could—and would—talk to anyone. Unlike our father, who makes jokes no one understands and leaves his listeners baffled and anxious to get away, it was fun to hear what our mom might come out with. "I got them laughing" was a popular line in the stories she'd tell at the end of the day. The men who pumped her gas, the bank tellers, the receptionists at the dentist's office. "I got them laughing." Her specialty was the real-life story, perfected and condensed. These take work, and she'd go through half a dozen verbal drafts before getting one where she wanted it. In the course of the day, the line she *wished* she'd delivered in response to some question or comment—the zinger—would become the line she *had* delivered. "So I said to him, 'Buddy, that's why they invented the airplane.'"

We'd be on the sidelines, aghast: "That's not how it happened at all!" But what did it matter with such great results?

You'd think my mother could have seen the difference between the sunny, likable her and the dark one who'd call late at night. I could hear the ice cubes in her glass rushing forth whenever she took a sip. In my youth, when she'd join my father for a drink after work—"Just one, I have to get dinner on the table"—that was a happy sound. Now it was like a trigger being cocked.

"The little bitch," my mother would say, her voice slurred, referring to someone she might have spoken to that afternoon, or maybe five years earlier—a shop clerk, a neighbor. "Talking to *me* that way? Like *that*? Like I'm nothing? She doesn't know it, but I could buy and sell her."

Fly home for a visit and you'd find her in the kitchen, slamming around, replaying some argument she'd had



with our father. “Goddam bastard, shove it up your ass, why don’t you, you and your stinking ‘*Why hire a plumber when I can do it myself?*’ You *can’t* do it yourself, you hear me, buddy? You *can’t*.” Late in her life, my mother embraced the word “fuck,” but could never quite figure out its place in a sentence. “So I said to him, ‘I don’t give a damn fuck what you *do* with it, just get it the hell out of my driveway.’”

By that point in the evening, she’d look different, raw, like you’d taken the lady she was earlier and peeled her. The loafers she favored would have been kicked off and she’d be in her stocking feet, hands on the counter to steady herself as she raged. She was hardly ever angry at the person she was talking to, exceptions being my brother Paul, my father, and my sister Tiffany; rather, she’d be looking for support. “Can you believe this shit? I mean, *can you?*” We didn’t dare contradict her.

I have an English friend named Ingrid, and her father was an alcoholic. When he lost his license for driving drunk, he got himself a tricycle and would pedal it back and forth to a pub, everyone in the village watching.

“Not a regular bike?” I asked.

“He would have fallen off!” Ingrid told me, relieved to be at the stage where she could laugh about it. Her father was a horrible person, a mean clown, which makes it easier, in a way. Our mother did nothing so cartoonish, and if she had we’d have felt traitorous making fun of her. Instead, we separated her into two people, and discounted what the second, drunk one did. For that wasn’t really her, we reasoned, but a kind of virus talking. Her father had it, too, and drank until men in white coats carted him off to the state hospital, where he received shock treatments. I look at pictures of him after his release and think, Wait, that’s me. We didn’t resemble each other when I was young, but now we could be twins.

The big moment on “Intervention” is when family and friends of the alcoholic or drug addict confront him or her. It’s supervised by a counsellor and often takes place in a sad hotel conference room with flesh-

colored furniture and no windows. The addicts are usually in full blossom, drunk or high or on the nod. “What the hell . . . ?” they’ll say, looking around at their parents, their brothers and sisters, their wives or husbands, all together, seated in a semicircle.

The subjects of the intervention already feel ambushed, so steps are taken to keep them from feeling attacked as

well. It’s easy to lose one’s temper in this situation, so the counsellor has instructed the friends and family members to organize their thoughts on paper. The letters they read are never wholly negative, and usually kick off with a pleasant memory. “I remember when you were

brought home from the hospital” is a big one. This is the equivalent of a short story beginning with the main character’s alarm clock going off, and though I know I shouldn’t get hung up on this part of the show, I do. *Oh, please*, I think, rolling my eyes as the combative meth addict is told, “You had a smile that could light up a room.”

The authors of the letters often cry, perhaps because what they’ve written is so poorly constructed. Then again, reality TV is fuelled by tears. Take another of the shows I like, “My 600-lb Life,” about morbidly obese people struggling with their weight. In each program, loved ones appear, always weeping, always saying the exact same thing: “I don’t want to have to bury my own” child/sister/nephew, etc.

Yes, well, I wouldn’t, either, I think. If digging the grave didn’t do me in, I’d surely die trying to roll that massive body into it. There’s crying on “Hoarders” as well, though rarely by the pack rat, who sees no downside to saving all his toenail clippings.

After everyone on “Intervention” has had his say, the addict is offered a spot in a rehab center. Not all of them accept, but most do. The places they’re sent tend to be sunny: Arizona, Southern California, Florida. We see them two months into their stay, most looking like completely different people. “Here are the wind chimes I made in my arts-and-crafts group,” the woman who, earlier in the program, was seen shooting speed into her neck says.

Not everyone stays the prescribed ninety days. Some leave early and relapse. Others get out on schedule and relapse a week or six months later. The heartiest of them are revisited several years down the line, still sober, many with jobs now, and children. “All that time I wasted,” they say. “What on earth was I thinking?”

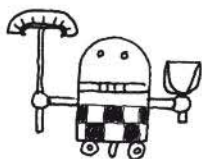
I asked Ingrid once if she ever talked to her father about his drinking, and I think she was ashamed to answer no. Not that I or anyone in my family ever confronted my mother, no matter how bad it got. Even my dad, who’s super direct, and tells complete strangers that they’re loud or wrong or too fat for that bolero jacket, said nothing. Then again, it built so gradually. For as long as I was living at home, it never seemed a problem. It was only after five of her six children had left that she upped her quota. The single Scotch before dinner became two, and then three. Her wine intake doubled, then tripled. She was never a quality drinker—quantity was what mattered. She bought jugs, not bottles. After dinner, she’d switch to coffee, and then back to Scotch or wine, supplementing the alcohol with pills. “Mom’s dolls,” we called them.

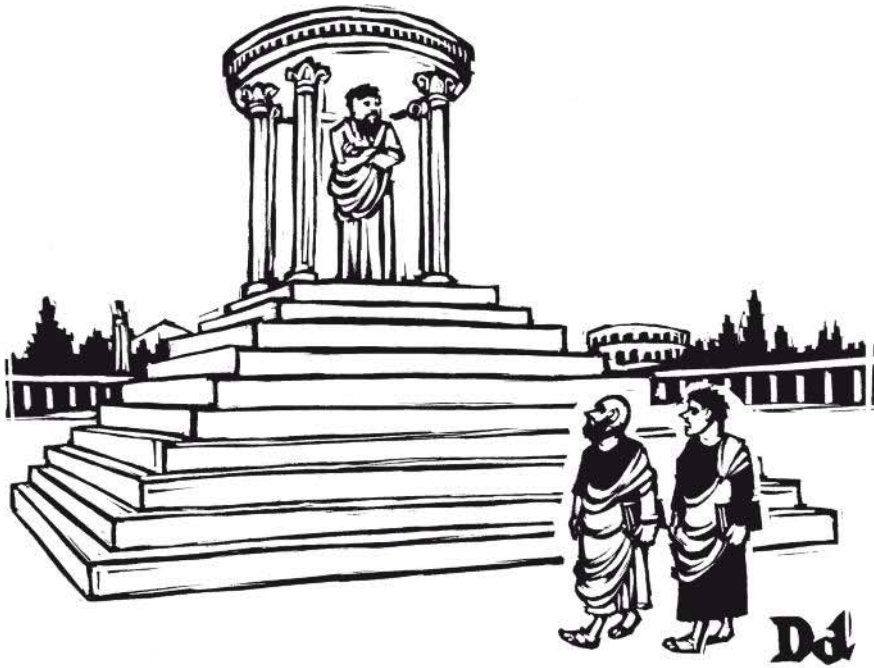
When she told us that she would no longer drive at night, that she couldn’t see the road, we all went along with it, knowing the real reason was that by sunset she was in no shape to get behind the wheel. “Gosh,” we said. “We hope that doesn’t happen to our eyes when we’re your age.”

In that respect, you have to hand it to the family members on “Intervention.” Corny letters notwithstanding, they have guts. The person they’re confronting might storm out of the room and never talk to them again, but at least they’re rolling the dice. Though we never called our mother on her behavior, she knew that we noticed it.

“I haven’t had a drink in four days,” she’d announce out of nowhere, usually over the phone. You could hear the struggle and the hope in her voice. I’d call her the next night, and could tell right away that she’d lost her will power. “Why aren’t you stronger?” I wanted to ask. “I mean, really. Can’t you just *try harder?*”

Of course, I was drunk, too, so what





*"It's the part of the public forum dedicated to the free and open exchange of his idea."*

could I say? I suppose I felt that my youth made it less sad. The vast plain of adulthood stretched before me, while she was well into her fifties, drinking alone in a house filled with crap. Even sober, she'd rail against that, all the junk my father dragged home and left in the yard or the basement: old newspapers and magazines, toaster ovens picked out of the trash, hoses, sheets of plywood, all of it "perfectly good," all of it just what he needed.

In my mind, our house used to be so merry. There was music playing in every room. The phone was always ringing. People in my family laughed more than people in other families. I was as sure of that as I was of anything. Up and down the street, our neighbors left their dinner tables as soon as they could and beat it for the nearest TV. That's what my father did, while the rest of us stayed put with our mother, vying for her attention as the candles burned down. "Group therapy," she called it, though it was more like a master class. One of us would tell a story about our day and she'd interject every now and then to give notes. "You don't need all that detail about the bed-

room," she'd say, or, "Maybe it's best to skip the part about the teacher and just cut to the chase."

"Pour me a cup of coffee," she'd say, come ten o'clock, our empty plates still in front of us. "Get me another pack of Winstons from the pantry, will you?" One of the perks of having six kids was that you didn't have to locate anything on your own. "Find my car keys," she'd command, or, "Someone get me a pair of shoes."

There was never a rebellion, because it was *her* asking. Pleasing our mother was fun and easy and made us feel good.

"I'll light her cigarette . . ."

"No, I will."

Maybe ours wasn't the house I'd have chosen had I been in charge of things. It wasn't as clean as I'd have liked. From the outside, it wasn't remarkable. We had no view, but still it was the place I held in mind, and proudly, when I thought, Home. It had been a living organism, but by the time I hit my late twenties it was rotting, a dead tooth in a row of seemingly healthy ones. When I was eleven, my father planted a line of olive bushes in front of the house. They were waist-

high and formed a kind of fence. By the mid-eighties, they were so overgrown that pedestrians had to quit the sidewalk and take to the street instead. People with trash to drop waited until they reached our yard to drop it, figuring the high grass would cover whatever they needed to discard. It was like the Addams Family house, which would have been fine had it still been merry, but it wasn't anymore. Our mother became the living ghost that haunted it, gaunt now, and rattling ice cubes instead of chains.

I'd come home from Chicago, where I was living, and she would offer to throw a dinner party for my friends. "Invite the Seiglers," she'd say. "And, hey, Dean. Or Lyn. I haven't seen her for a while."

She was lonely for company, so I'd pick up the phone. By the time my guests arrived, she'd be wasted. My friends all noticed it—how could they not? Sitting at the table as she repeated a story for the third time—"I got them laughing"—watching as she stumbled, as the ash of her cigarette fell onto the floor, I'd cringe, and then feel guilty for being embarrassed by her. Had I not once worn a top hat to meet her at the airport, a top hat *and* suspenders? With red platform shoes? I was seventeen that year, but still. And how many times had I been drunk or high at the table? Wasn't it maybe *my turn* to be the embarrassed one? Must remain loyal, I'd think.

The morning after a dinner party, her makeup applied but still in her robe, my mother would be sheepish. "Well, it was nice to see Dean again." That would have been the perfect time to sit her down, to say, "Do you remember how out of control you were last night? What can we do to help you?" I'm forever thinking of all our missed opportunities—six kids and a husband, and not one of us spoke up! I imagine her at a rehab center in Arizona or California, a state she'd never been to. "Who knew I'd be so good at pottery?" I can hear her saying, and, "I'm really looking forward to rebuilding my life."

Sobriety would not have stopped the cancer that was quietly growing inside her, but it would have allowed her to hold her head up—to recall what



it felt like to live without shame—if only for a few years.

“Do you think it was my fault that she drank?” my father asked not long ago. It’s the assumption of an amateur, someone who stops after his second vodka tonic, and quits taking his pain medication before the prescription runs out. It’s almost laughable, this insistence on a reason. I think my mother was lonely without her children—her fan club. But I think she drank because she was an alcoholic.

“How can you watch that crap?” Hugh would say whenever he walked into the house on Maui and caught me in front of “Intervention.”

“Well, I’m not *only* watching it,” I’d tell him. “I’m also signing my name.”

This was never answer enough for him. “You’re in Hawaii, sitting indoors in the middle of the day. Get out of here, why don’t you? Get some sun.”

And so I’d put my shoes on and take a walk, never on the beach but along the road, or through residential neighborhoods. I saw a good deal of trash—cans, bottles, fast-food wrappers—the same crap I see in England. I saw flattened cane toads with tire treads on them. I saw small birds with brilliant red heads. One afternoon, I pushed an S.U.V. that had stalled in traffic. The driver was perhaps in his mid-twenties and was talking on the phone when I offered a hand. He nodded, so I took up my position at the rear and remembered after the first few yards what a complete pain in the ass it is to help someone in need. I thought he’d just steer to the curb, but instead he went another hundred or so feet down the road, where he turned the corner. “Does he expect me to . . . push him . . . all the way . . . home?” I asked myself, panting.

Eventually, he pulled over, and put on the brake. The guy never thanked me, or even put down his phone. Asshole, I thought.

Back at the house, I took another stack of papers and started signing my name to them. “That’s not your signature,” Hugh said, frowning over my shoulder.

“It’s what’s *become* of my signature,” I told him, looking at the scrawl in front of me. You could sort of make out a “D” and an “S,” but the rest was

like a silhouette of a mountain range, or a hospital patient’s medical chart just before he’s given the bad news. In my defense, it never occurred to me that I’d be signing my name five thousand times. In the course of my entire life, maybe, but not in one shot. This was not the adulthood that I had predicted for myself: an author of books, spending a week in Hawaii with his handsome longtime boyfriend before deciding which house to return to. I had *wished* for it, sure, but I also wished for a complete head transplant.

Hugh had made himself a Manhattan and was sitting on the patio with my manuscript. A minute passed, then two. Then five. “Why aren’t you laughing?” I called.

I was living in New York, still broke and unpublished, when my mother—only sixty-two years old—died. Aside from the occasional Sidney Sheldon novel, she wasn’t a reader, so she didn’t understand the world whose edges I was fluttering around. If she thought it was hopeless, or that I was wasting my time writing, she never said as much. My father, on the other hand, was more than happy to predict a dismal future. Perhaps it was to spite him that she supported us in our far-fetched endeavors—art school for Gretchen and me, Amy at Second City. Just when we needed money, at the moment before we had to ask for it, checks would arrive. “A little something to see you through,” the accompanying notes would read. “Love, your old mother.”

Was she sober in those moments? I wondered, signing my name to another sheet of paper. Was it with a clear mind that she believed in us, or was it just the booze talking?

The times I miss her most are when I see something she might have liked: a piece of jewelry or a painting. The view of a white sand beach off a balcony. Palm trees. How I’d have loved to spoil her with beautiful things. On one of her last birthdays, I gave her a wasp’s nest that I’d found in the woods. It was all I could afford—a nursery that bugs made and left behind. “I’ll get you something better later,” I promised.

“Of course you will,” she said, reaching for her glass. “And whatever it is I’m sure I’m going to love it.” ♦

## MEMORIES OF A MURDER

*DNA evidence exonerated six convicted killers. So why do some of them recall the crime so clearly?*

BY RACHEL AVIV

When Ada JoAnn Taylor is tense, she thinks she can feel the fabric of a throw pillow in the pads of her fingers. Taylor has suffered from tactile flashbacks for three decades. She imagines herself in a small apartment in Beatrice, Nebraska. She is gripping the edges of a pillow, more tightly than she means to, and suffocating a sixty-eight-year-old widow. “I feel for her,” Taylor told me recently. “She was my grandmother’s age.”

Taylor confessed to the woman’s murder in 1989 and for two decades believed that she was guilty. She served more than nineteen years for the crime before she was pardoned. She was one of six people accused of the murder, five of whom took pleas; two had internalized their guilt so deeply that, even after being freed, they still had vivid memories of committing the crime. In no other case in the United States have false memories of guilt endured so long. The situation is a study in the malleability of memory: an implausible notion, doubted at first, grows into a firmly held belief that reshapes one’s autobiography and sense of identity.

Eli Chesen, a Nebraska psychiatrist who evaluated Taylor and her co-defendants after their release, told me, “They still believed to varying degrees that they had blood on their hands.” He compared the case with the Jonestown Massacre, in 1978, when a cult leader persuaded more than nine hundred people to commit suicide in Guyana. “You have a group of people who are led to share the same delusion, at the same time, with major consequences,” he said. “Their new beliefs superseded their previous life experiences, like paper covering a rock.”

Taylor still worries that her family and friends are secretly thinking, “You are a murderer.” “You’re not there, JoAnn,”

she tries to tell herself. “It’s O.K. You are not a bad person.” But the memory of holding the pillow still makes her cry.

Beatrice is a city of twelve and a half thousand people in southeastern Nebraska, surrounded by wheat, corn, and soy fields. Its economy relies on the state hospital for the mentally disabled, originally called the Nebraska Institute for Feeble-Minded Youth. The poet Weldon Kees, who grew up in Beatrice, wrote a series of loosely fictionalized stories about the city. In one, construction workers, digging near an Indian burial ground, have uncovered a corpse. On their boss’s orders, they stay quiet and pulverize the body.

Taylor, who grew up on a cattle farm in Leicester, North Carolina, followed her boyfriend to Beatrice in 1981, when she was eighteen and pregnant with his child. Three weeks later, he left her. She enrolled at Beatrice High School and brought up her daughter, Rachel, alone. A closeted lesbian, Taylor typically wore bluejeans and men’s black button-front shirts. She was known in town as a bully. A police officer described her as “some sort of Amazon.” She drew attention to herself by making casually provocative statements. “I come from a very suicide-attempting home,” she’d announce to strangers.

At night, she drank at the R&S, a bar in downtown Beatrice that attracted bikers and misfits. She recalled her state of mind as “wasted, moody, and easy to snap.” She carried whiskey in her jacket pocket and, when she drank, she acted like a little girl, skipping and singing.

At the recommendation of child-protection services, Taylor began seeing a psychologist named Wayne Price, who was charged with helping her become a better parent. “He told me I was like a snail,” Taylor said. “I was reaching out to be loved, but I was closing my doors.” She had been removed from her home

when she was eleven, after her stepfather repeatedly molested her, and she spent her adolescence in foster care. She realized that “on the inside there is a soft person waiting to be released.”

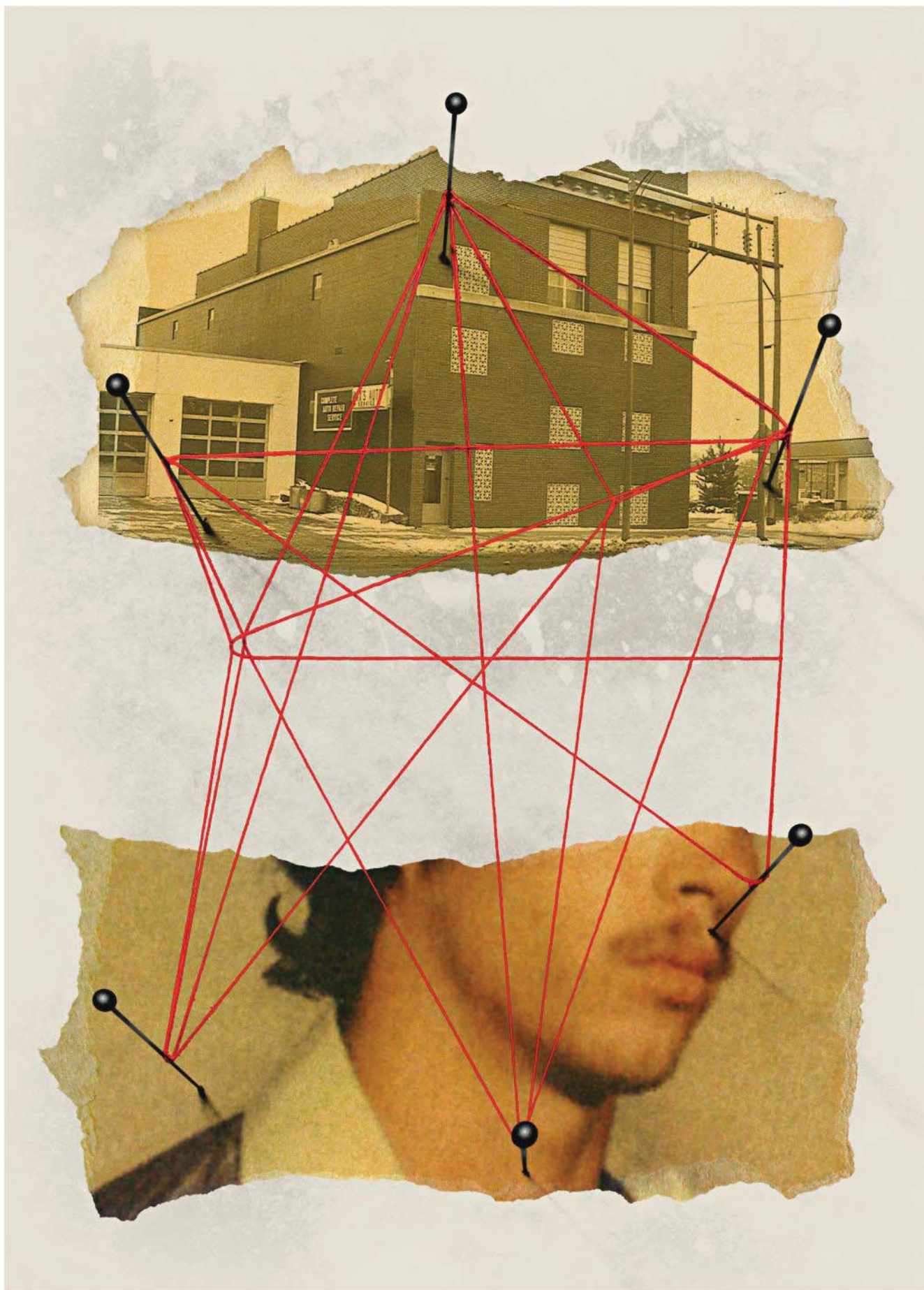
Price gave her a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, an illness marked by instability of mood and self-image. After several months of counselling, Price noted that Taylor was “trying to be more domestic, baking, doing handiwork.” But she was still impulsive and emotional, and, in 1985, he recommended that she surrender her parental rights. Taylor trusted Price and agreed. “It takes a stronger mother’s love to let go than to hold on’ is the only way I can describe it,” she said. She gave her daughter up for adoption and moved to Los Angeles, where she supported herself by doing sex work.

A few months later, she returned to Beatrice with Joseph White, a handsome twenty-two-year-old who had been making gay pornographic films in L.A. He wanted to help Taylor fight for custody of her daughter. Neither of them grasped that the court procedure was over; she had lost all her rights.

Taylor reunited with a group of classmates from high school who were sexually unconventional, poor, and self-loathing. White, who liked to carve wood and write poetry, became friends with them, too. They started making a low-budget pornographic film. A local cop complained that they “were on the streets of Beatrice at one, two, three o’clock in the morning.” Another officer said, “They had nothing. And they didn’t know nobody.”

The Lincoln Telephone & Telegraph office, in the center of Beatrice, is a red brick structure with a white stone cornice, where some twenty “telephone girls”—women dressed in dark skirts and white blouses—used to connect twenty-five thousand phone calls a day. “Every woman in the neighborhood knows how many chickens every hen





*"If you relax, memory is more likely to occur," a psychologist told the suspects. "It may occur in dreams."*



*"At this point, Murray's just my white-noise machine."*

within ten miles has hatched," the Beatrice *Democrat* wrote, shortly after the company was founded, at the turn of the twentieth century. In the fifties, after the invention of direct dialing, the building was converted into apartments, which were occupied mostly by elderly females and young single working women.

A few months after Taylor returned to Beatrice, Helen Wilson, who lived alone on the first floor, was raped and suffocated. The police found Type B blood from the intruder on Wilson's mattress, wall, and underwear, and semen in her body. A grandmother, Wilson had played bingo a few nights a week and volunteered at the nursery of the Methodist church, a half block away. The police assumed that the culprit was someone lost in a religious fervor—there were several other churches nearby—or a homosexual, because Wilson had been raped anally. A psychological profile developed by the F.B.I. concluded that the murderer was a loner who'd had psychological counselling and collected pornography, and who was "odd and wimpy."

The police placed a voice-activated tape recorder inside a flowerpot at Wilson's grave site, to track suspicious mourners, and asked the owner of an adult bookstore in Beatrice for a list of known homosexuals. More than three hundred people were interviewed, including White. He had never met Wilson. "I know nothing about her but what I heard from the scuzbut on the streets," he told an officer. He was eliminated as a suspect, because his blood wasn't Type B.

Three weeks after the murder, Taylor, having finally realized that she would never be a part of her daughter's life, returned to her family, in North Carolina. She stopped drinking and worked, in vain, to repair her relationship with her mother. "I tried to forget all about Nebraska completely," she said.

The Wilson case went cold. A young hog farmer named Burdette Searcey, a former officer with the Beatrice Police Department, told Wilson's daughter, who ran a laundry where he had his clothes cleaned, that he would try to solve it. A

short but bullish man who enjoyed watching crime shows on television, Searcey was unfulfilled by his work on the farm, and he began delving into the case as an unpaid private investigator. He interviewed people, he said, who "liked to roam around town, that didn't have jobs, that were vagabonds, in my opinion."

Two years after the crime, Searcey gave up farming and was hired as a deputy in the Gage County Sheriff's Office, where he stayed on the Wilson case, even though the Beatrice Police Department was in charge. He occasionally stopped Taylor's therapist, Price, on the road by flashing his emergency lights. "He wanted to bounce some ideas off of me," Price said. A former Army doctor who supervised graduate psychology students at the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln, Price was seen as the town's expert on all things behavioral. He worked as a consulting psychologist for both the police and the sheriff's departments, and he was also a sheriff's deputy. Price asked Searcey to stop pulling him over; it was embarrassing.

Searcey brought up the Wilson case so many times that the sheriff finally told him that he was "damned tired of hearing about it." The sheriff said, "If you think you can solve it, then get it done."

In March, 1989, Searcey drafted an arrest warrant for Taylor and White, based on information that he had collected as a private investigator. He'd heard from a seventeen-year-old whom a Beatrice cop described as a "maybe retard" that they had bragged about committing the murder. In a memo, Searcey wrote that "White was a homosexual" and "a very strange young man," and that Taylor, in the days after the crime, was reported by friends to have been "very nervous."

When Price learned of the arrest warrant, he was disappointed in Taylor. "It was frustrating as a therapist to see your work going down the tube," he said in a deposition.

Searcey, Price, and the sheriff took a private plane to Alabama, to interrogate and arrest White, who had returned to his home town, Holly Pond. "Are you homosexual?" they asked him. "Have you ever been homosexual?" "Were you homosexual when you was in Beatrice, Nebraska?" White told them that he had been bisexual for a while. The notion that he was involved in the murder



was “pure, deep bullshit,” White said.

The next day, the three men flew to North Carolina and arrested Taylor. Searcey generally spoke with his suspects for a few hours, telling them about the crime, and didn’t record the conversation until they were ready to confess. A video of Taylor’s interrogation begins with her giggling at something the cops have said. Her long black hair is parted down the middle, and she wears large glasses. She has already taken responsibility for the crime—she says that White pressured her into it—but struggles to recall the details and, like a deferential student, asks for help. “I’m still drawing blank,” she says. Searcey suggests that she doesn’t want to remember. “I block a lot of bad things out, I always have,” she agrees. “I have problems—there’s a lot in my childhood I can’t remember.”

Taylor and White were brought back to Beatrice, where Taylor requested a private counselling session with Price. He was often called to the jail to help defendants in emotional distress, and he took pride in the county’s willingness to rely on psychological advice. “If you relax, memory is more likely to occur,” he would tell them. “It may occur in dreams. It may occur in bits and pieces.” He described the mind as a physical space, like a basement, where memories are stored and retrieved. In 1890, in “The Principles of Psychology,” William James wrote, “We make search in our memory for a forgotten idea, just as we rummage our house for a lost object.” But James’s image of memories as discrete packets, deposited in a physical space, is obsolete. If memory is like a house, it is one that is constantly under construction. As the cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus put it, “Memory is born anew every day.” We piece together fragments of recollection, shaped by beliefs and impressions, and unwittingly embellish and invent our own pasts.

Taylor told a second psychologist who evaluated her, “In my head and in my heart, I know I wasn’t there.” But after several interviews she gave up on the idea of her innocence. As Searcey outlined her role in the crime—“Kind of let that build and think about it if you can,” he urged her—she assembled a narrative. “I can put myself in her place, because I have been through the sexual

abuse, and that’s what makes it rough on me,” she said. When she recounted Wilson’s rape, she always cried.

At first, she told Searcey that the rape had occurred in a white, single-story house with a porch, much like the house that she had lived in as a young child. But, she said, “everybody kept telling me that it was an apartment. Then it dawned on me that it wasn’t a house.” During the rape, she could hear herself screaming, “Stop, don’t, it hurts, leave her be.” She heard White say, “JoAnn, you know you deserve it,” but it sounded like her stepfather’s voice. She told Searcey, “I don’t know if it’s the connection between the past rape and what I’m seeing at the time, but that’s what runs—what I hear. I hear it as clear as a bell.”

After seeing photographs of the crime scene, Taylor developed a new theory: she was Wilson’s protector. She said that she had picked up a pillow from the couch and held it over Wilson’s face. It was an act of compassion. “I know with my rape my father’s face has haunted me all my life,” she said. “I didn’t want her to see the face that would haunt her.” But she was so agitated that she pressed too hard. She said, “I did not realize I was killing her.”

Ralph Stevens, a cop with the Beatrice Police Department who participated in the early stages of the investigation, thought that Taylor was delusional. “She made up stories,” he said. “She was out of reality.” When Stevens gave the sheriff



his opinion, he was told that he was “muddying the waters,” according to court records. The police department was removed from the investigation shortly thereafter. The chief of police said, “I thought they had the wrong people.”

In Taylor’s first confession, she casually referred to “another boy” who had been in Helen Wilson’s apartment, but her description of his appearance dissolved into nothing: he was “not real slen-

der, not real bulky,” with hair “not black but not quite real blond.” Searcey showed her a lineup of six photographs, and, with guidance, she picked out a high-school classmate, Tom Winslow, whom Searcey considered bisexual. (In a memo, Searcey wrote that Winslow and White had had “sexual confrontations with each other.”)

Winslow, who was twenty-three, had dainty, feminine features, curly blond hair, and big hands, which he waved in the air when he talked. He had been bullied in school. Like Taylor, he had once seen Price for therapy. Winslow had attempted suicide, and Price gave him a diagnosis of depression, writing that he “does seem to obsess about not hurting others. He focuses on the discomfort of others and tries to make everyone feel better.”

By the time the video recording of Winslow’s interview begins, he has already accepted blame. He says that he was pressured to accompany the two others to Wilson’s apartment and then fled when he heard Wilson scream. Like Taylor, he recalls details that fit with his self-conception, describing the crime as part of an unfortunate pattern in his life. “I have to make friends or I’ll get insecure,” he tells Searcey. “I’ll get scared, because I feel like I can’t make any friends, so I’ll do anything.”

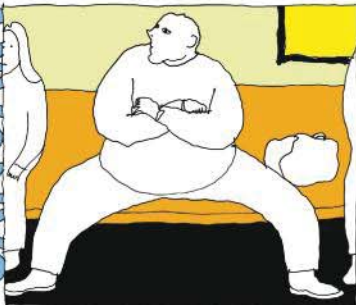
He says that he worked at the Beatrice Good Samaritan Center with Jan, Wilson’s granddaughter, and that he’d felt burdened by guilt. “Do you know how it was at work . . . when Jan was crying on my shoulder and not to tell her?” he says. “Do you know how low that makes me feel, because I’ve held it for this long?”

When Searcey asked the Beatrice Community Hospital for records of a blood transfusion Winslow had once had, he learned that Winslow’s blood type didn’t match the residue in the apartment, either. The state serologist was surprised that none of the three suspects had Type B blood. She asked the county attorney, “How many people you going to have on this thing?” He told her, “I don’t think we’ve come to the end yet.”

Debra Sheldon, Helen Wilson’s grandniece, was friends with Taylor’s crowd, though she was more reserved than many of them. Sheldon, who was thirty, had been sexually abused as a child by her stepfather. Now she was married and had a child. Her

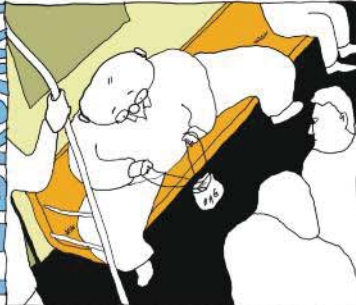
# MANSPREADERS OF THE YEAR

JANUARY



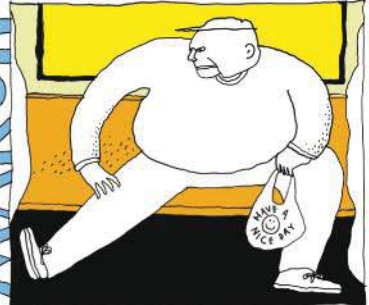
ROYCE LIKES LONG, LOUD MOVIES AND SLOW WALKS ON THE BEACH.

FEBRUARY



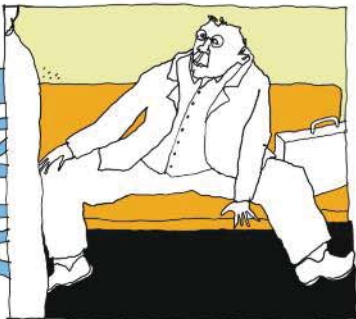
"IT'S ALL IN THE OBLIVIOUSNESS," SAYS MORTON.

MARCH



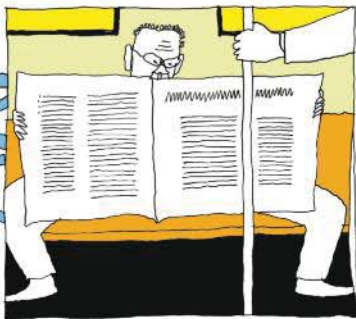
FRANKLIN DOESN'T LET KNEE PAIN KEEP HIM FROM TAKING ALL THE SPACE.

APRIL



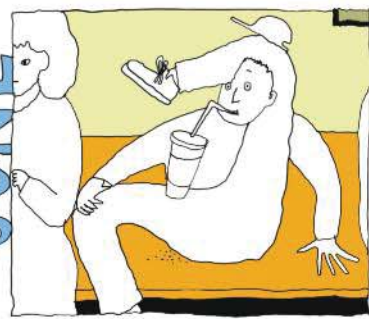
MAKE WAY FOR JUSTIN!

MAY



"TO KEEP UP WITH THE NEWS, LEAVE ROOM FOR THE PAPER," SAYS EDGAR.

JUNE



KYLE DOES IT IN STYLE!

JULY



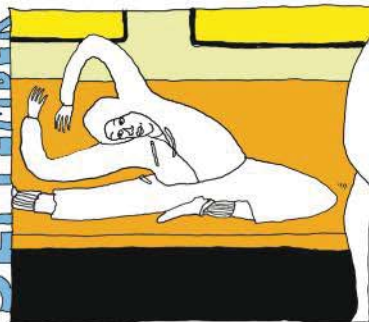
HORATIO LOOKS COMFY!

AUGUST



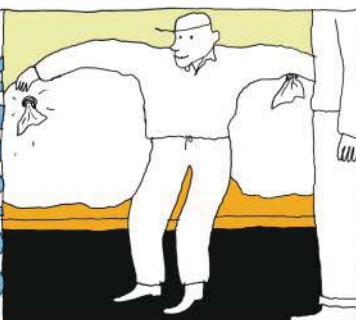
TREY COMBINES A CAREFREE ATTITUDE WITH AN ENVY-INDUCING LEGSPAN!

SEPTEMBER



JOHN THE SWAN.

OCTOBER



"FULL LAUNDRY BAGS MAKE THE PERFECT ARMRESTS!" SAYS WILL.

NOVEMBER



JARED PASSES A LAZILY RUSH HOUR ON THE TRAIN WITH A BOOK AND A SNACK.

DECEMBER



REGGIE MAKES IT LOOK EASY!



name was on a list of possible suspects, friends of White and Winslow, compiled by the county attorney. A Beatrice cop said that Sheldon “maybe hung out with these people because, you know, maybe it brought a little importance to herself.” Another officer wrote that she “may not do too well on an I.Q. test primarily because of deprivation as to cultural background.” She seemed to lack a point of view; someone else’s perspective looked just as compelling as her own. A psychologist wrote, “She is essentially incapable of defending an independent opinion.”

In Sheldon’s first interview with Searcey, she seemed more concerned with masking her intellectual disability than with implicating herself. She answered most of his questions with vague and succinct phrases, avoiding verbal risks. She told Searcey that she had helped the three others gain entrance to the apartment, but, when she saw what was happening, she tried to intervene. White pushed her away.

“Do you recall how he pushed you?” Searcey asked.

“He shoved.”

“And how did he shove you?”

“He shoved me with his hands.”

“Do you know what happened to you when he shoved you?”

“Um, all I know I fell.”

“Do you know where fell?”

“Um, I think I fell on the floor.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

Sheldon’s blood wasn’t Type B, either. Searcey pressed her to reveal whether a fifth person had been in the apartment. Her court-appointed lawyer, Paul Korslund, who later became the mayor of Beatrice and then a judge for the First District Court in Nebraska, asked Price if he would meet with her. Korslund assumed that she had been so traumatized by the murder that she had forgotten what had happened. When Sheldon heard descriptions of the rape, she covered her ears.

Like Taylor and Winslow, Sheldon was predisposed to trust Price. A decade before, the child-welfare office had become worried about her parenting skills. Price was appointed to help her become “more effective in her interactions

with others and with society.” She, too, had agreed to surrender her parental rights. Sheldon was passive and compliant; a fellow-inmate at the Gage County jail described her as a “Cabbage Patch doll come to life.”

After her meeting with Price, Sheldon had a dream: her husband’s friend James Dean had been in the apartment, too. “I was blocking it, I guess,” she told Searcey. “I wasn’t thinking enough to push it all out.”

James Dean was arrested the next day. It was his twenty-fifth birthday, and he and a team of construction workers had just finished demolishing houses in Lincoln, fifty miles from Beatrice. He was booked into the Gage County jail. A guard wrote that he was “pacing, crying, talking to himself,” waving his arms and exclaiming, “I’ve been arrested on something I know nothing about.”

The sheriff’s staff called Price and asked him to come to the jail to help Dean calm down. In a long session with Price, seventeen days after his arrest, Dean began crying and said that, as a child, he had been beaten by his father and his brother-in-law. Price proposed to Dean that these childhood experiences had created a fear of violence, which caused him to repress his memories of the crime. Price relied on the theory that some events are so traumatic that they are retrieved only through flashbacks and dreams, a notion that became so fashionable in the nineteen-eighties and nineties that it led to one of the most shameful episodes in the history of psychotherapy: patients, eager to please their therapists, engaged in “memory work,” which produced claims of convoluted forms of abuse, like infant incest and satanic ritual rape—memories they later disavowed.

Although at first Dean denied that he was involved, Price wrote that by the end of the session Dean “was doubting the veracity of his own statements.”

After the meeting, Dean took naps to see if he could get “visions of things.” He tried to “let my mind wander into the case.” He soon gained emotional clarity. Dean realized that Joseph White, whom he used to see at the R&S bar, reminded him of his brother-in-law. “They could be brothers in the

asshole nature,” he said. When he thought about the crime, what came to mind was “my ex-brother-in-law, the way he treated me.” It wouldn’t surprise him that he’d been pressured by White to do something immoral. He said his brother-in-law had also forced him to do things that made him uncomfortable, like steal tires.

Six days after Dean’s session with Price, he confessed to Searcey that he had been an accomplice to Wilson’s murder. “I feel that I remembered it in my sleep,” he said. “I had a memory loss, which just kind of just—I didn’t have no idea about none of this stuff.” He seemed fascinated by his new understanding of his own mental processes.

The metaphors we use to describe our minds evolve with technology: Aristotle compared the mind to a wax tablet; Freud called it a “mystic writing-pad,” a device like an Etch A Sketch, which had recently come on the market; in the nineteen-twenties, the British psychologist Tom Hatherley Pear compared it to a gramophone; a few decades later, the American neuroscientist Georges Ungar said that it worked like a telephone switchboard. Dean described it as a videotape, a metaphor appropriate for the eighties. He told his lawyer that his memories of the crime were fragmented because “all of a sudden the movie breaks. Boom!” He snapped his fingers. “You missed the section of the movie. Tie the movie back together. By the time you got it tied together, I already missed a half-hour segment of it.”

Dean’s blood wasn’t Type B, either. The deputies urged him to try to recall whether a sixth friend had been in the room. “I got an idea but I can’t say. You know, I don’t want to put a wrong name in there and get you guys in trouble,” he said. “I’ll put in the missing pieces as it comes back to me.”

Five weeks after his arrest, Dean dreamed that a sixth person was standing in Wilson’s apartment. At first, he wasn’t sure if it was a man or a woman. Then, in another dream, he got a chance to rewind the scene. Based on “difference in the way the body structures are,” he said, he “detected that it was a female.” He took a closer look and recognized the face: Kathy Gonzalez. She had lived in the apartment above Helen

Wilson's. The next day, Gonzalez, a twenty-nine-year-old cook at a fish restaurant, was arrested.

Gonzalez had Type B blood. Two days after her arrest, Price visited her in jail to try to jog her memory about the crime. "I can tell you, you're fully sane," he told her in a recorded interview. "You know right from wrong. You're in good shape there. You're basically a healthy person."

"Then why don't I remember?" she said.

"If I had seen what took place, I would have blanked it, too," Price said.

Price reminded Gonzalez of Mr. Rogers: he wore bluejeans and sneakers and had a pleasant, forgiving demeanor. But his theory of memory didn't make sense to her. She vividly remembered the worst thing that had happened to her as a child: she had been molested by an uncle. "I've done my share of little sins, but we're talking about killing an old person," she told Price. "I mean, why would I block this out? I mean, it had to be pretty bad."

"It's bad," Price said. He wondered if she had any trouble sleeping, a sign that perhaps she was haunted by the memories.

"I've never had difficulty," she told him. "Sleeping's always been my favorite thing to do."

He assured her that her memories of the crime would surface. "You'll have lots of time to sit and think," he said. "You'll be safe and well treated—time to relax."

"O.K.," she said. "But in the meantime my life has just went down the tubes."

"It's O.K. to cry," Price told her. "Sometimes crying lets some of the pressure off, too. You laugh, you can talk, you can cry."

"I'd rather laugh," she said.

At the Gage County jail, Gonzalez confronted Shelden and Taylor, asking them why they thought she had participated in the crime. Shelden laughed and said, "I don't know—I just remember you." Taylor told her, "I don't actually remember you being there."

As the six suspects awaited trial, they were ideal inmates. They had all been brought up in small white towns, where they considered police officers their guardians. Five of them had grown up in broken homes, bonding with fam-

## HOW TO BUILD A STRADIVARIUS

The masters wrote—to yield the best result,  
harvest after a cold winter

the wood condensed by ice and storms  
in whose gales the highest notes are born.

From summits of Balkan maple, red spruce  
gathered in a valley off the Italian Dolomites,

they carved each instrument's alluvial curves.  
Then came the varnish—one coat

of painter's oil, another of plain resin.  
Only the thinnest of layers to obtain

that satin chatoyancy, that liminal *reflet*.  
It's said Stradivari, playing to the trees,

first noticed the straight pines  
like strings on a vast, divine violin

absorbing Heaven's vibrations.  
The truth could be found in the song itself—

how it was impossible to tell where  
the wood ceased and the song began—notes pure

as a mathematical equation. Transposing *mountain*.  
*Valley*. *Mountain* again.

—Ilyse Kusnetz

ily members who abused them—a survival strategy that they applied in this new context. Like many young people who are insecure and confused, they had an inchoate sense that they were guilty of something; they just needed to be told what it was. Don't many of us wake up in the morning with a vague feeling of shame, thinking, What sin did I commit? Searcey's description of the crime gave that feeling form.

The defendants were deferential to the sheriff, Jerry DeWitt, whose living quarters were attached to the jail. They referred to themselves as Jerry's Kids. Gonzalez observed that Shelden would greet all the deputies and jailers. "She wanted to be real close to all of them," she said. "It didn't matter which one it was; I think that she just wanted to be loved." Gonzalez noticed a similar longing in Taylor: "I think she thought any

scrap of love is better than none." Taylor and Shelden talked through the bars of their cells every day about their lost daughters.

Dean wrote forty-three notes to the sheriff's staff that concluded with the phrase "please thank you." "Thanks for all the good meals," he wrote the sheriff and his wife. He was consumed by a compulsion to be helpful. He continued to dream about the crime, recalling so many details that he gave eight different statements. "Please come talk to me," he wrote to Searcey three months after his arrest, "before I forget what I have remembered so we can get it on tape." At the end of one interview, when Searcey asked if there was anything that Dean would like to add, he laughed and told the interrogators to "delete my mistakes."

He felt so guilty about his role in the



crime that he planned to write Wilson's family to express his remorse. "It was killing him to think about it in his cell," the sheriff wrote. At a deposition, Dean pointed to a wall and said, "I wouldn't care if they stood me against that and shot me for what I did."

In Taylor's telling, her confessions represented a kind of rebirth. She was confronting her past by proxy, recalling the details of another woman's rape. "I took the barrier down," she said. "I have been very truthful with everybody because I finally opened up." Taylor described the sheriff and his deputies as "nurturing," like friends. She saw Price as her champion and emotional guide, and felt swept up by the collective endeavor to bring a rapist to justice. "I can handle my memory now," she said in a deposition, adding that she finally felt like a "complete person." She described the "new JoAnn" as "easy going, soft, gets along with people."

Debra Shelden was the first to plead guilty. "I was there at the scene, and I should be properly punished," she told the judge. James Dean followed, saying that in dreams he'd remembered more than eighty per cent of the crime. A few months later, Taylor pleaded guilty, too. She cried as she described Helen Wilson's assault, whispering, "Come on, Jo, you can do it, you've got to." (A psychologist assessed Taylor's competence to stand trial and found her sane, though he noted that she "reflexively feels guilty for everything.")

Tom Winslow gave a series of conflicting statements before concluding that he was not involved. He and Kathy Gonzalez pleaded no contest, saying that they had no memory of Wilson's murder. They were afraid that if they went to trial they would face the electric chair, a prospect that the sheriff and his deputies had told them was likely. Gonzalez, who described herself as "polished trailer trash," said, "They managed to get a bunch of people that really didn't have important lives. We weren't very well educated. We weren't really conducting our lives in a Christian manner for the most part. And they just got rid of us." She added, "None of us were innocent; we were all broken in one way, shape, or form."

Joseph White was the only suspect who tried to prove that he was innocent. He requested DNA testing, but his motion was denied. At his trial, for rape and murder, the only evidence against him was his co-defendants' confessions. By then, he had become the object of their projections. He was the evil stepfather, the abusive brother-in-law, the bully—the monster in all their lives.

When Taylor testified, White's attorney, Toney Redman, asked her, "Can you actually separate today what you remember from the night this happened and what was suggested to you to help you remember what happened that night?"

"No," she replied. "It would almost be impossible to separate."

"Tell me what parts you actually remember that you didn't have to have suggested to you," he asked.

"Oh, God."

"Is there anything?"

"Not that I can remember right offhand," she said. "I know there is somewhere along the line, but I can't remember."

Dean and Shelden testified, too, and Redman was puzzled to see that their accounts of White's actions, which had once been wildly disparate, had begun to cohere. "There was a thread to their story, a consensus," he said. "It was like they had become weirdly bonded to an idea. They didn't have a firm commitment to anything in life—they drifted from here to there—and all of a sudden here is

something solid they can believe in." By the end of the trial, Redman, too, assumed that White was guilty.

The guilty verdict was announced after the jury had deliberated for five hours. White's mother said later that her son "just kind of slumped, like, I can't believe this." He was sentenced to life in prison.

JoAnn Taylor was sent to the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women, to serve a sentence of forty years. A psychiatrist at the prison wrote that she suffered from "flashback and re-experiences of her crime." She felt as if she were capable of more evil than she'd realized. The psychiatrist wrote, "She is fearful of losing control of her mind."

After four years in prison, Taylor wrote to the judge who had sentenced her: "Sir, I'm very sorry for the mistake I made in my life in 1985. I cannot bring Mrs. Wilson back but I pray everyday that you and others can find it to forgive me." She also wrote to Wilson's granddaughter, apologizing for causing her pain. Joy Bartling, a friend in prison, said that, when Taylor didn't receive a reply, she kept asking, "How come they won't forgive me?" Bartling told her, "You have to forgive yourself." Bartling assured her, "You didn't have any intention to suffocate her. You were protecting her from seeing what was going on."

Taylor's lawyer, Lyle Koenig, stayed in touch with her for ten years. "At no point in time did she ever say, 'I did not



*"Day 37: I've finally earned the E. coli's trust."*

do this,” he said. Koenig told me that if he were to represent her again, he would not do anything differently. Her family assumed that she was guilty, too. Her brother Henry told her, “You are doing what you have to do to pay your debt to society.”

Shelden never protested her punishment, either. Her guilt became a central fact of her identity, and she excelled at being a prisoner. After being granted trusty status, she was allowed outside the prison walls to weed the grounds. “When they pulled that gate open, I couldn’t move,” she told me. “I was too scared to go out.”

Dean was sentenced to ten years, but a year after his confession he began to wonder if he really was guilty. Away from the presence of Searcey, he said, “It came to me, you know—what did I do? I wasn’t involved in this thing.” He scanned a few law books to see if he could undo his guilty plea and concluded that he was “sunk dead in the water.” He tried to comfort himself with the thought that maybe he was repenting for a different crime: he had gone over the speed limit in his car; sometimes he had spun his tires. He said, “I got it through my head that I was being punished for the things that I hadn’t been caught for.”

White was less acquiescent. At the Nebraska State Penitentiary, he worked in the wood shop, saving all the money he earned to hire a new lawyer. In 2001, Nebraska passed a statute allowing convicted felons to seek DNA testing, and he filed a motion to request it.

White tried to persuade Winslow, who had been sentenced to fifty years, to petition for DNA testing, too. For more than a decade, Winslow was regularly raped in prison. “I just shut down,” he told me. “I was just trying to maintain.” He was grateful for small acts of benevolence: when the warden allowed him to attend his father’s funeral, he marvelled that the guards let him stay a little more than an hour.

Winslow’s attorney, Jerry Soucie, said that Winslow was reluctant to have his DNA tested. During his time in prison, he had reconciled himself to the idea that maybe he had participated in the crime after all, and just didn’t remember. “He had kind of ac-

cepted his fate,” Soucie told me. “He felt that maybe the government was right, and he had done something horrible.” Soucie said that Winslow, like many people who falsely confess, had “greater anxiety confronting authority than dealing with whatever punishment that authority imposes.”

The DNA tests were completed in August, 2008, and they excluded both White and Winslow as the source of the semen at the crime scene. When James Dean’s DNA was examined, the results showed that he could not have been the source, either. All the DNA from both the blood and the semen had come from an unknown male.

The Nebraska attorney general’s office assembled a task force to follow up on the leads in the original case files. After two months, it found a match for the DNA: Bruce Allen Smith, a juvenile delinquent whose grandmother had lived in the building. The probability that he was not the lone source of the semen and blood in the apartment was nine hundred and fifty-one quintillion to one. Smith had died of AIDS, in Oklahoma, seven years after the crime.

Soucie told Winslow the news. “What I got from him was that he was afraid to be innocent,” Soucie said. “It meant he’d spent nineteen years rationalizing.” When Soucie visited Taylor in prison and told her that the evidence exonerated her, she said, “O.K., who the hell are you, and why are you playing with me? You’re full of shit.”

In early 2009, an assistant attorney general announced that the six people were innocent “not beyond a reasonable doubt but beyond all doubt.” It was the largest DNA exoneration involving false confessions in the history of the American judicial system. Taylor, White, and Winslow were promptly released. (Dean, Gonzalez, and Shelden were already out of prison, having been freed after five years.) The attorney general’s office encouraged them to file applications to be pardoned.

Shelden, who lived with her husband in a van in Lincoln, resisted the idea. “I had bad memories of the whole thing, and I didn’t want to push it,” she told me. But her friends at a soup kitchen where she ate every day encouraged her to apply. In her pardon application, however, Shelden wrote,

“I was present and observed Joseph White and Thomas Winslow on top of Helen Wilson.” She added, “To my knowledge, Mr. Smith was not present at the time I was in the apartment.”

All six pardons were granted. After Taylor’s release, she moved to a half-way house in Omaha and struggled to convince herself that she had never met Mrs. Wilson, as she had come to refer to her. Her friend from prison, Joy Bartling, said that Taylor asked her, “If I didn’t put the pillow on her head, why do I keep having these thoughts and visions?”

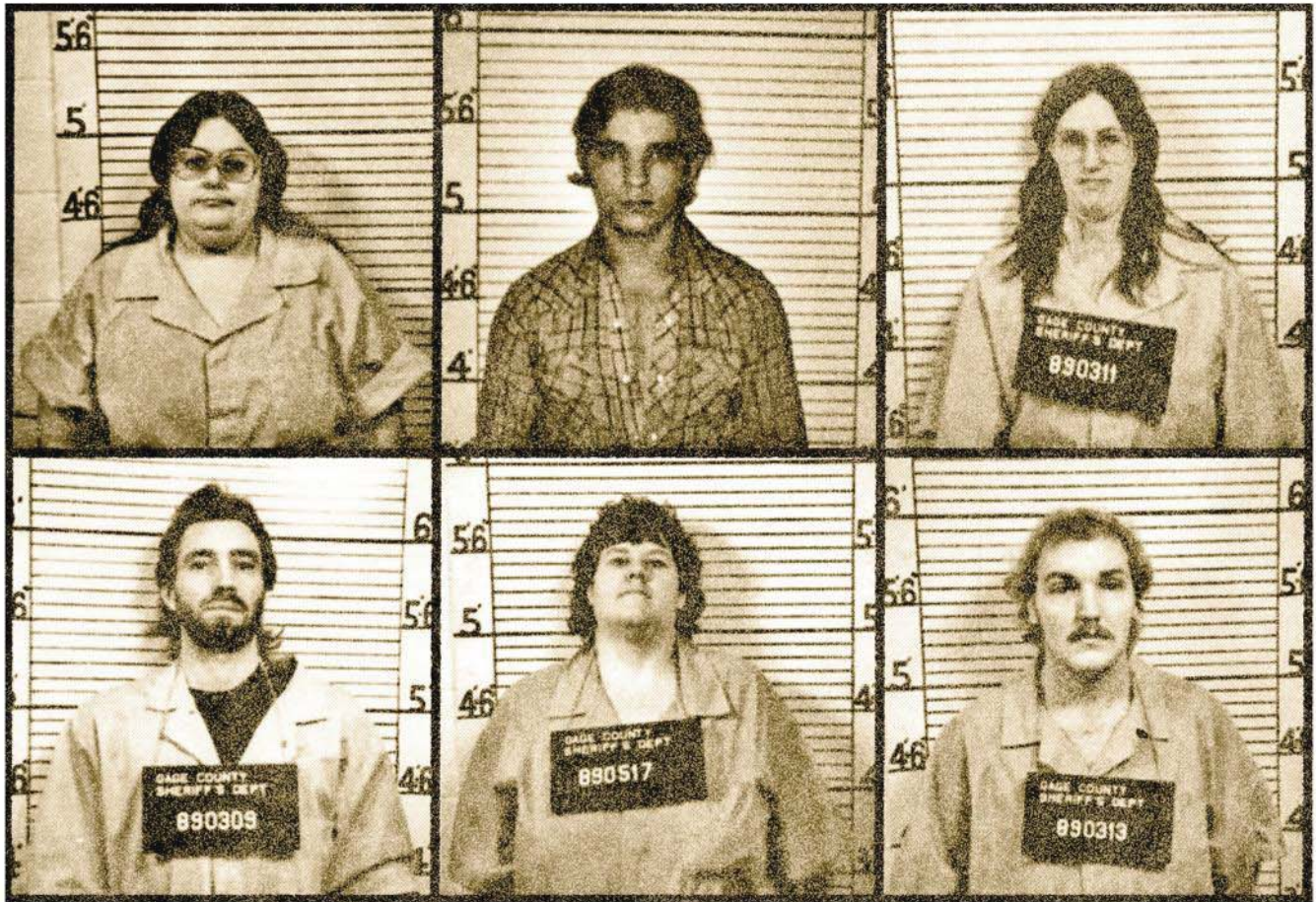
Joseph White sued the county for conducting an investigation so reckless that it violated his civil rights. But in 2012, shortly after filing the suit, he died in an accident in an Alabama coal refinery, where he was working. The five other defendants continued his lawsuit. “Part of the reason we pushed through the emotions was because of Joe White,” Winslow told me. “He gives us the extra strength. He was stronger than us all the way around.”

The case went to trial last June, in Lincoln. Before it began, Shelden’s lawyers asked her when she had last seen Joseph White. “The night of the murder,” she responded. They decided that when she took the witness stand it would be best to avoid questions about the past. One of the lawyers, Maren Chaloupka, said, “I didn’t want to be the next person to contaminate her memory.”

Eli Chesen, the Nebraska psychiatrist, told the jury that Taylor, Dean, and Shelden suffered from Stockholm syndrome. In forty years of practice, it was the first time he’d seen the condition. He described it as “a brutal kind of bonding, psychological bonding, to someone who has total control over you.” He called Price the “Rosetta stone” in the case: “Price implanted his own belief system into his captive/patient,” he wrote in a report. (Through his lawyer, Price declined to speak with me.)

Beatrice has only a few psychologists, and Price was given a nearly occult kind of authority, as if he were the only person who had access to the mysteries of the human mind. It is not uncommon for law-enforcement officials, even judges, to suspend common sense in the presence of a scientific expert, whose





*The six suspects had all been brought up in small white towns, where they considered police officers their guardians.*

superior training lends his personal opinions the weight of truth. Price, who is still a reserve deputy with the sheriff's office, was widely admired in Beatrice. Taylor's lawyer at the civil trial, Jeffrey Patterson, told me, "He's a very nice guy. I just liked him personally. He was a fairly straight shooter." Chesen, who had a therapy practice in the same building as Price, said that patients described him as charismatic. Taylor's original defense attorney considered him a friend.

In his dual role as psychologist and deputy, Price was so focussed on unravelling the crime that he seemed to lose sight of the vulnerabilities of his former patients. Research shows that the people most susceptible to false memories have a tendency toward dissociation, a coping mechanism reported by victims of sexual violence: they learn to detach from the moment, to feel as if they were not fully there. Taylor, who still refers to the theory of repression that Price taught her, told me, "My memory problems began when I was raped." She said that her confidence in her memory deteriorated further when her mother re-

fused to acknowledge that the abuse had occurred. During the civil trial, even as Taylor listened to all the evidence exonerating her, she occasionally became so distressed that she thought, I'm a bad person. I had to have done it.

Fictitious memories do not only afflict those who have been traumatized; people with stable backgrounds also struggle to distinguish between experiences that they had themselves and those they absorbed through someone else's stories. Studies show that people will come to believe that they were in an accident at a family wedding, were attacked by an animal, or had tea with Prince Charles, if they are told that family members saw it happen. The more often the stories are told, the more likely the memories are to be implanted. A 2015 study in *Psychological Science* found that seventy per cent of people, when subjected to highly suggestive and repetitive interviews, would come to believe that they had committed a crime. They developed what the authors called "rich false memories," detailed and multisensory, of having perpetrated a theft

or an assault. The authors wrote that "imagined memory elements regarding what something *could* have been like can turn into elements of what it *would* have been like, which can become elements of what it *was* like." In the past thirty years, roughly a hundred men and women in the United States have confessed to crimes for which they have later been exonerated by DNA evidence.

The attorneys for the county argued that the six should get no more than three hundred thousand dollars each in damages, and suggested that it was Winslow's fault that he had been repeatedly raped while he was serving his sentence. "Don't get me wrong, I don't think anybody should be abused like that in prison," one of the attorneys said. "But you saw him testify here. You saw his video. Mr. Winslow is effeminate in nature."

How should a town atone for its negligence? The jury determined that Gage County, along with Price and Searcey, owed the Beatrice Six, as they have come to be known, more than thirty



million dollars, four times the county's annual tax revenue. The county appealed, but is now considering bankruptcy, which would be considered a first for any such community in Nebraska. Last winter, at a town meeting at Valentino's Primavera Room, a restaurant three blocks from Helen Wilson's apartment, forty people, all white, most of them graying men, tried to strategize. One man suggested civil disobedience: refuse to pay property taxes. "Show you got a backbone and stand up straight!" he shouted. Others suggested ending funding for pre-K education, cutting government jobs, taxing groceries, ceasing road maintenance, or quadrupling property taxes for farmers, a proposal that residents said would make them move away.

At a state judiciary-committee meeting in March, delegates from the county argued that the state should pay the judgment. Ernie Chambers, a state senator, disagreed, saying that taxpayers in Gage County should pay a price for electing incompetent and heartless leaders. "You made your bed," he said. "Lie

in it." Chambers recommended that the county put a lien on the courthouse and sell the sheriff's cars.

**H**elen Wilson's grandson, Bob Housman, runs Jan's Cleaners, in downtown Beatrice, where Searcey used to have his uniform dry-cleaned. Housman, a sixty-three-year-old with a reddish beard, said that he would consider leaving town if the judgment caused him to pay higher taxes. He dismissed Bruce Allen Smith's role in his grandmother's death. "I don't feel the connection," he told me. "I never did, though he probably was there at one point or another."

"Do you feel that there were seven people there?" I asked him.

"I don't *feel*," he said. "I know."

His theory was that the six broke into the apartment and murdered Wilson around midnight. "I still have nightmares about it," he said. They could have left the door open, allowing Smith to walk into the apartment in the early morning and rape her dead body, leav-

ing his DNA. Housman and his wife clean the uniforms and suits of many people who hold public office in the county, and he said that nearly all of them still think the six are guilty.

The county sheriff, Millard Gustafson, who took over the department in 2007, told me, "The DNA doesn't get rid of the other half of the case. The six had to know something about it, or had to have been there—that's the sense that the public has." A quote from Ecclesiastes hung from a wooden tablet outside his office: "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong."

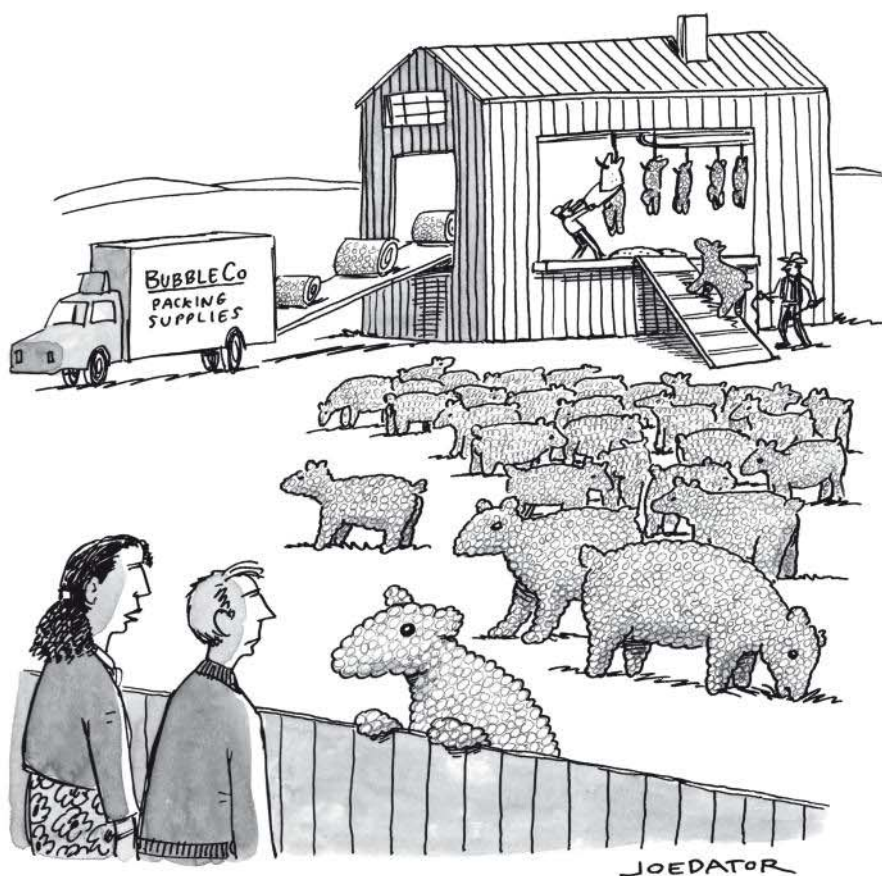
Roy and Gregory Lauby, brothers whom I met at a popular restaurant, Country Cookin' Cafe, told me that they didn't know anyone who felt anger toward the officials who put the Beatrice Six in prison. The brothers thought that the six were innocent, but they were wary of accusing county officials of doing anything wrong. Greg, a former farmer, noted that even the Beatrice *Daily Sun* seemed to avoid getting into details of the trial. (The paper's slogan used to be "If you didn't see it in the *Sun* it didn't happen.")

Roy, a plumber, suggested that the delusion that had gripped Taylor, Sheldon, and Dean now held sway over the town. "We were brainwashed by our elected officials just like the six were brainwashed," he said.

Kathy Gonzalez, who now lives ninety miles from Beatrice and works as a cashier at a grocery store, said she regrets that she didn't leave Nebraska after she was released. When she meets people who live in or near Beatrice, she hears the same sentiment: "You guys managed to get away with this."

**B**urdette Searcey retired from the sheriff's department last November. He helps out at his wife's store, the Flower Shop, delivering bouquets. The store is a domestic jungle: peonies planted in Greek Revival columns and porcelain trucks; floral arrangements interspersed with miniature footballs; pastel wooden birds, wreaths, and birdhouses; garden statues in the form of angels; and framed inspirational quotes like "Live well laugh often love much."

When I introduced myself, Searcey



*"Now that I've seen this, I don't think I can ever enjoy popping bubble wrap again."*



apologized for not being able to sit down for an interview. A warm, energetic man, he didn't enjoy turning down a conversation. "Being on the good side of this, we don't talk," he said. But he was either too polite or too stubborn not to. "We've got a-hundred-per-cent backing from the public in Beatrice," he told me. "I am loved by my people in this community."

He became so animated that his wife, who was taking orders on the phone, told him to step away. We moved to the front of the store, where, pacing, he repeatedly set off the door's motion sensor. He had a habit of introducing concepts whose reality he doubted by using scare quotes: there was Bruce Smith, the "quote DNA donor," and the prospect, if the county's appeal of the judgment failed, that he would "quote lose" the case.

"Let's not try to advertise anything that didn't happen, because if I advertise good enough I might get you to buy," he told me. "I might." He repeated, "I might."

He said that there were two separate cases: the murder of Wilson by the six and, hours later, a rape by Bruce Smith. The proof, he said, was that after Wilson had gone to sleep a full pot of coffee was brewed in her kitchen, and he remembers that there were several dirty cups near the sink (crime-scene photographs show only one). Helen Wilson always put her dirty dishes away, and why would Bruce Smith make more than one cup of coffee? The six must have brewed the coffee and drunk it. He said, "I'll go to my deathbed on that."

**D**eбра Shelden keeps her mother's ashes in her basement. She wants to spread them beside her father's grave, at the Beatrice Cemetery, as her mother requested, but Shelden is afraid to return to Beatrice. She thinks she was told that if she set foot in Beatrice she'd be prosecuted again, but she can't remember who said this or when it happened. "How does it feel to not be able to trust your own mind?" her lawyer Chaloupka asked at the civil trial. "It's not very good," she replied.

This spring, Shelden, Chaloupka, and I had dinner at Imperial Palace, a Chinese restaurant in Lincoln, near Shel-

den's house. She was genial and chipper, giggling whenever anyone else laughed. I had met with Searcey earlier in the day, and I told her his theory about the coffee. "I don't remember where any of the coffeepots or anything was," she said. "I stayed in one of the other rooms. I just stood in front of the door." Chaloupka gently touched her arm, and Shelden paused. She became flustered and looked as if she were trying to jog the memories with her hands, sketching the answers in the air. "I don't remember what I did at the crime," she told me, "because I wasn't there, apparently."

She often appended her description of the crime with the phrase "according to my statement," as if she had been reduced to the status of a character in someone else's story, and would defer to the original text. She held her palms up, side by side. "Once things came out of my mouth, it was like a big book," she told me. "It just opened up—all the pages."

**A**fter the civil trial, JoAnn Taylor moved back to North Carolina. Her attraction to Nebraska was always tied to her daughter, Rachel. Following Taylor's exoneration, they had a reunion before drifting apart. Taylor sensed that Rachel, raised middle class, disapproved of her. She was sure that Rachel's husband did, too. "In his mind and in his attitude, I'll always be a murderer," she told me.

I met Taylor at her church, Christian Life of Hendersonville, where she had come for a free dinner. Her hair was cut short and dyed black and burgundy. Taylor carries a knife in her purse and projects a sense of authority. It is easily punctured. After a few minutes of small talk, she said that if I told her enough times that my shirt was green—it was gray—she would probably believe it. "I will eventually say, 'Oh, yeah, it is green.' I am going to accept that. It's going to start clicking."

The next day, we met at the public library, and she wore a green blouse herself—a flouncy, patterned one that she told me represented a new, gentler way of being in the world. For decades, she'd

abstained from color, frills, anything that seemed too feminine. "I am a work in progress on soft," she said. She was still preoccupied by a goal she had set for herself thirty-five years earlier, when she saw Price for counselling. She longed to be the kind of person who was confident enough in her own sense of goodness that she would know definitively that she could never commit murder.

Our conversation was repeatedly interrupted by alerts from a real-estate Web site. New houses in Hendersonville had just come on the market or been repriced. Taylor was desperate for a place of her own and, if the settlement money ever comes through,

she plans to buy a small house. For the past few weeks, she had been living with a family from church, sleeping in their seven-year-old daughter's bedroom.

Her only regular income was disability benefits. When she applied for them, a caseworker paused while reading her application. One of the medical conditions listed was Stockholm syndrome. "You've got Patty Hearst disease?" the caseworker asked. "How'd that come about?"

"I was the captive," Taylor explained, "and the sheriff was my captor. Duh."

Mrs. Wilson is a daily presence in her life. "I can feel it in my hands," Taylor told me. She closed her eyes and lifted her palms. "The touch and the weight of the pillow. It still gives me chills."

I asked her why it was the pillow, of all images, that lingered. She closed her eyes again, and said that when her stepfather raped her he used to cover her face with a pillow—a detail that I'd never seen her mention in hundreds of pages of psychological records, depositions, and testimony. After years of transposing details of her rape onto Wilson's, she seemed to be overlaying her own childhood with the final moments of Wilson's life. "Once you are assaulted," she said, and trailed off, crying. "I don't know why I felt I had to protect her. I don't know if, subconsciously, it was me protecting me." She quickly checked Facebook on her phone, a tic that seemed to steady her. "I don't have to be that abused little girl anymore," she said. ♦



# A BIRD OF FEW WORDS

*Narrative mysteries in the paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.*

BY ZADIE SMITH

The exhibition space on the fourth floor of the New Museum, in New York, is a long room with a high ceiling. You might expect towering video screens in here, or something bulky and three-dimensional, requiring circling—entering, even. But on a recent day the room was filled with oils. The show has a melancholy, literary title, “Under-Song For A Cipher,” and consists of seventeen paintings hung low, depicting a set of striking individuals, all slightly larger than human scale, though not imposingly so. Most are on herringbone linen; one is on canvas. It’s impossible to avoid noticing that they are all—every man and each woman—physically beautiful. Mostly they are alone. They sit, stretch, lounge, stand, and are often lost in contemplation, their eyes averted. If they are with others, the company is never mixed, as if too much heat might be generated by introducing that half-naked man over there to this sharp-eyed dancing girl.

In the oeuvre of the British-Ghanaian painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, there are quite a few dancers, lithe in their leotards, but all of her people look as though they might well belong to that profession. They are uniformly elegant. One young man puts his hands on his knees and laughs, with his legs apart and his feet turned out; he is dressed simply, like the rest, in blocks of swiftly laid paint, creating here a black vest, there some white trousers. No shoes. The artist dislikes attaching her figures to a particular historical moment, and there’s no way around the historicity of shoes. Sometimes the men hold animals like familiars—an owl, a songbird, a cat. The colors are generally muted: greens and grays and blacks and an extraordinary variety of browns. Amid this sober coloration splashes of yellow and pink abound, and vivid blues and emerald greens, all tempered by

the many snowdrop gaps of unpainted canvas, like floral accents in an English garden.

The surrounding walls are painted a dark heritage red, bringing to mind national galleries and private libraries, but also, for this viewer, the books you might find in such places, specifically the calico covers of nineteenth-century novels. This red has the effect of bringing a diverse selection of souls together, framing and containing them, much like a novel contains its people, which is to say, only partially. For Yiadom-Boakye’s people push themselves forward, into the imagination—as literary characters do—surely, in part, because these are not really portraits. They have no models, no sitters. They are character studies of people who don’t exist.

In many of Yiadom-Boakye’s interviews, she is asked about the source of her images, and she tends to answer as a novelist would, citing a potent mix of found images, memory, sheer imagination, and spontaneous painterly improvisation (most of her canvases are, famously, completed in a single day). From a novelist’s point of view, both the speed and the clarity are humbling. Subtleties of human personality it might take thousands of words to establish are here articulated by way of a few confident brushstrokes. But the deeper beguilement is how she manages to create the effect of wholly realized figures while simultaneously confounding so many of our assumptions about the figurative. The type of questions prompted by, say, Holbein (*What kind of a man was Sir Thomas More?*) or Gainsborough (*What was the social status of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews?*), or when considering a Lucian Freud (*What is the relation between painter and model?*), are all short-circuited here, replaced by an existential query not much heard in contemporary art: Who is this? The answer is both literal and lib-

erating: No one. Nor will the titles of these paintings identify them. A dancing girl in the midst of an arabesque bears the caption “Light Of The Lit Wick.” A gentleman in an orange turtleneck with a cat on his shoulder: “In Lieu Of Keen Virtue.” That antic fellow with his hands on his knees: “A Cage For The Love.” We have become used to titles that ironize or undercut what we are looking at, providing conceptual scaffolding for feeble visual ideas, or weak punch lines to duller jokes. For Yiadom-Boakye, titles are allusive; they should be considered, she has said, simply “an extra mark in the paintings.” For an artist, she is unusual in describing herself as a writer as much as a painter—her short stories and prosy poems frequently appear in her catalogues. In a recent interview in *Time Out*, she reflected on the relation between these twin roles. “I don’t paint about the writing or write about the painting,” she said. “It’s just the opposite, in fact: I write about the things I can’t paint and paint the things I can’t write about.” Her titles run parallel to the images, and—like the human figures they have chosen not to describe or explain—radiate an uncanny self-containment and serenity. The canvas is the text.

Given the self-confidence of this work, it’s strange to note the anxiety that Yiadom-Boakye provokes in some critics. In the catalogue that accompanies the New Museum show, there is an essay by the academic art critic Robert Storr in which he deems it necessary to defend the work against the perceived retrogression of figurative painting: “If you accept Greenbergian premises and methodologies, representation was definitively eclipsed by abstraction sometime in the early 1950s”—a line of argument that might lead you to believe Clement Greenberg





*"Light Of The Lit Wick" (2017). Yladiom-Boakye's figures push themselves into the imagination, as literary characters do.*

is still busy over at *Commentary* instead of being dead for more than two decades. The mid-century debate over the figurative and the abstract—which Greenberg’s coining of the term “post-painterly abstraction” did much to further—aligned the figurative with illusion: the illusion of depth in a canvas, and the pretense of three-dimensional human life on what was, in truth, an inert, two-dimensional surface. The figurative was fundamentally nostalgic; its subject matter was kitsch; it was too easily manipulated for the purposes of propaganda, both political and commercial. Sentimental scenes of human life were, after all, what the Nazis and the Stalinists had championed. They were what the admen of Madison Avenue utilized every day. Meanwhile, the abstract sought to continue, in the realm of the visual, the modernist critique of the self. But, even when a critic allows for the somewhat antique formulation of these arguments (as Storr goes on to do), there is still something about the vicarious emotion provoked by the figurative that must be explained away or excused.

And so, in the same essay, Yiadom-Boakye is cautiously framed as the kind of artist who depicts an extreme otherness: “The impact of her pictures is of encountering people ‘we’—the general North American art audience—have never met, coming from a world with which ‘we’ are unfamiliar. One that we have no basis for generalizing about or projecting our fantasies onto.” Yet the subjects of these paintings are not members of a recently discovered indigenous tribe in Papua New Guinea but, rather, many handsome black men and women in unremarkable domestic settings.

There is a respectful caution in this kind of critique which, though undoubtedly well intended in theory, in practice throws a patronizing chill over such work. Yiadom-Boakye is doing more than exploring the supposedly uncharted territory of black selfhood, or making—in that hackneyed phrase—the invisible visible. (Black selfhood has always existed and is not invisible to black people.) Nor are these paintings solely concerned with inserting the black figure into an overwhelmingly white canon. Such pat truisms have a limited utility, espe-

cially when we find them applied without alteration to artists as diverse as Chris Ofili, Kerry James Marshall, and Kehinde Wiley. Ofili, in a delicate written response to Yiadom-Boakye’s work, passes over the familiar rusty argument of figuration versus abstraction, and attends instead to the intimate visual details: “The tightness of her bun. The size of his ear. She knew so much about so little of him. She said so little he heard so much.” Exactly. Here are some paintings of he and she, him and her. They say little, explicitly, but you hear much.

There are a few moments when the paintings also seem to respond more or less directly to a generalized notion of the “white canon.” An overly literal triptych, “Vigil For A Horseman,” features three handsome men laid out—in three different art-historical poses—on a candy-striped divan, calling to mind a riot of similar loungers: the Rokeby Venus, the picnickers of “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe,” Adam meeting the finger of God, a Modigliani nude. But these are the weaker moments in the show. The strongest paintings pursue an entirely different relation: not the narrow point-for-point argument between artist and art history but the essential, living communication between art work and viewer, a relationship that Yiadom-Boakye reminds us is indeed vicarious, voyeuristic, ambivalent, and fundamentally uncontrollable.

For even if you are intimately familiar with the various shades of brown on offer here—even if you’ve always known these particular broad noses, the specific kink of Afro hair, the blue and orange tints that rise up through very dark skin—you are still, as a viewer, entirely engaged in the practice of fantastical projection. The figures themselves are the basis for your fantasy, with their teasing, ambiguous titles, women dancing to unheard music, or peering through binoculars at objects unseen. They seem to have souls—that ultimate retrogressive term!—though by “soul” we need imply nothing more metaphysical here than the sum total of one person’s affect in the mind of another. Having this experience of other people (or of fictional simulacra of people) is an annoyingly persistent habit

of actual humans, no matter how many convincing theoretical arguments attempt to bracket and contain the impulse, to carefully unhook it from transcendental ideas, or simply to curse it by one of its many names: realism, humanism, naturalism, figuration. People will continue to look at people—to listen to them, read about them, or reach out and touch them—and on such flimsy sensory foundations spin their private fantasias. Art has many more complex pleasures and problems, to be sure, but still this consideration of “souls” should be counted among them.

And when I asked myself, inevitably, who these souls in the gallery were, I thought of a group of intensely creative people in a small community, living simply in poky garrets, watchful and sensitive, determined and focussed. Sometimes when they were flush—having sold a painting or a story—they’d do something purely for aesthetic pleasure, like buy a candy-striped divan or an owl or travel to Cadiz. Early New York beatniks, maybe, or some forgotten, South London chapter of the Bloomsbury Group. Poets, writers, painters, dancers, dreamers, philosophers—and lovers of same.

This fantasy was certainly my own projection, but I could find its narrative roots in the muted, modernist color palette and the “timeless” clothes, which turn out to be not so timeless: during the early decades of the twentieth century, Vanessa Bell wore these simple shifts (and no shoes) and Duncan Grant painted both his daughter and his Jamaican lover, Patrick Nelson, in similar swift blocks of color, where shirt or blouse meets trousers or skirt in a single mussed line, without recourse to belts or buttons. Yiadom-Boakye often cites the unfashionable British painter Walter Sickert as an influence, and it is perhaps here that the congruence occurs: Virginia Woolf was also an admirer of Sickert, and published a monograph about him; Vanessa, her sister, illustrated the cover.

Born in 1860, and a member of the Camden Town Group, Sickert, like Yiadom-Boakye, was gifted at painting wet-on-wet (completing canvases quickly, to avoid having to break the “skin” of paint that had dried overnight), disliked painting from nature,



and specialized in ambivalently posed figures in domestic settings, about whom one longs to tell stories. Certainly from Sickert (and Degas before him) Yiadom-Boakye has inherited a narrative compulsion, which has less to do with capturing the real than with provoking, in her audience, a desire to impose a story upon an image. Central to this novelistic practice is learning how to leave sufficient space, so as to give your audience room to elaborate. (Sickert, with his spooky and suggestive tableaux of Camden prostitutes, was so successful in doing this that he unwittingly planted the seeds of an outrageous fiction—that he was Jack the Ripper, a theory still alive today.)

Yet the keenness to ascribe to black artists some generalized aim—such as the insertion of the black figure into the white canon—renders banal their struggles with a particular canvas, and with the unique problem each art work poses. (For Yiadom-Boakye, the problem of a painting, she has said, begins with “a color, a composition, a gesture, a particular direction of the light. My starting points are usually formal ones.”) It also risks flattening out individual conversations with tradition. Kerry James Marshall, for his recent show “Mastery,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, included a mar-

vellously eclectic and unexpected selection of pieces from the Met’s permanent collection, a supplementary “show within a show,” which had the effect of positioning Marshall’s own “mastery” as both a confrontation with and a continuation of the familiar Western European mastery of such figures as Holbein and Ingres. But Marshall also took us on a journey down side roads more obscure and intimate, deep into the thickets of an artist’s individual passions. Why, out of all the masterpieces in the Met, does a man pick out a certain Japanese woodblock print, or a bull-shaped boli from West Africa? These are the mysteries

of personal sensibility, often obscure to critics but never less than essential to artists themselves.

Sometimes the process of making art is a conversation not so much with tradition as with the present moment. Born in 1977, Yiadom-Boakye was nineteen when an exhibition of works from the collection of Charles Saatchi, “Sensation,” opened in London, at the Royal Academy. The show presented, among other excitements, Damien Hirst’s shark, the Chapman



*Yiadom-Boakye calls herself a writer as much as a painter.*

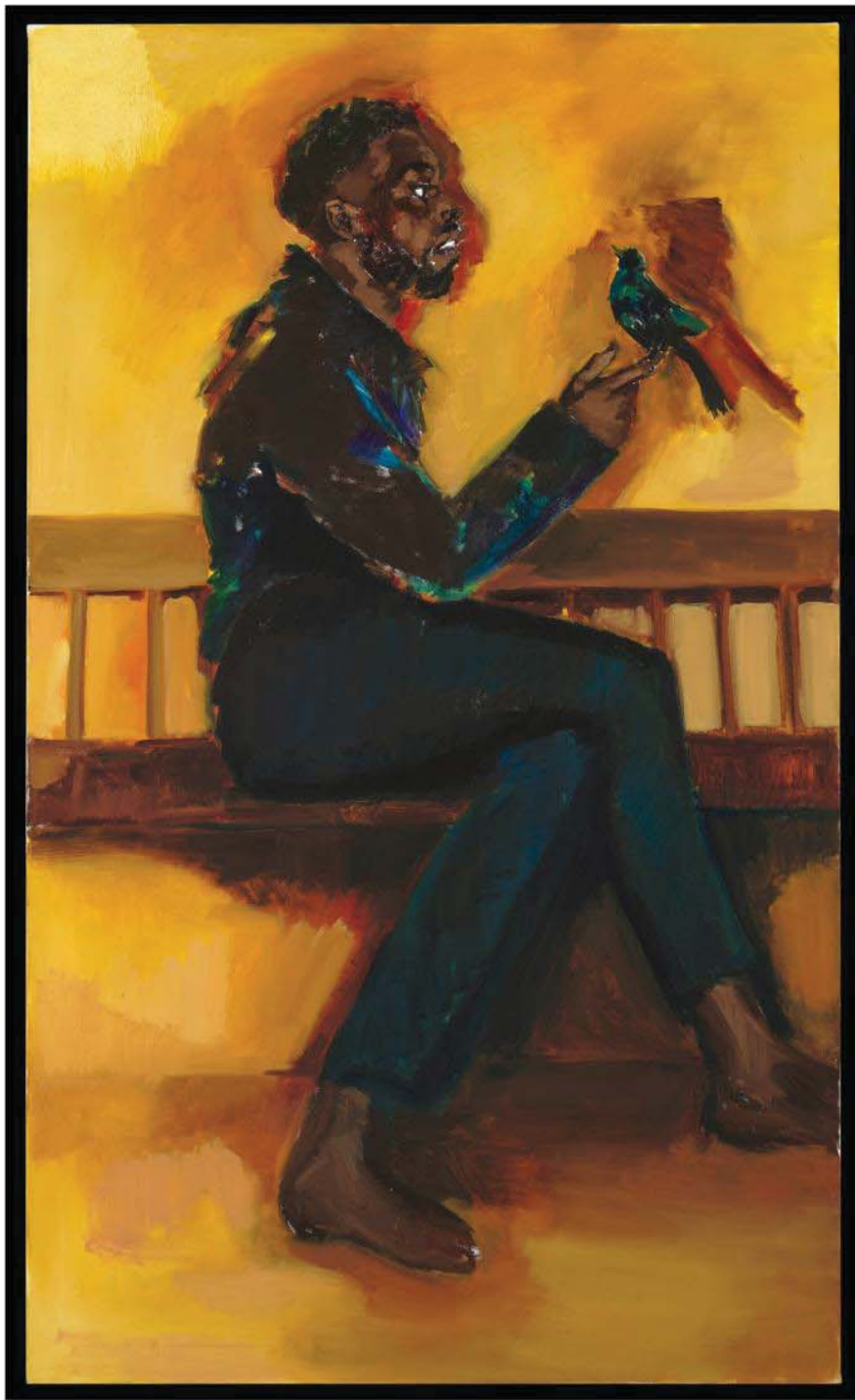
brothers’ polymorphously perverse child mannequins, and Sarah Lucas’s mordant mattress with its cucumber penis. “Sensation” and its Young British Artists dominated the art conversation, enraptured the tabloids, and relegated British portraiture to the debased realm of one-note arguments and conceptual gimmicks. (The most famous portrait in “Sensation”—Marcus Harvey’s “Myra,” a re-creation of a notorious photo of the British child-murderer Myra Hindley, rendered in a child’s handprints—sparked so much controversy that the show was almost shut down.) Even the good work was ill served by the central conceit of the

show, which encouraged visitors to look “past” the paint to the supposed sensation of the manifest content (Chris Ofili’s Madonna with elephant dung, Jenny Saville’s “fat” female nudes). At the time, Yiadom-Boakye had just finished a dispiriting one-year foundation course at Central Saint Martins, the prestigious art school in London, where she’d discovered, as she explained in a 2013 interview with Naomi Beckwith, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, that the conversations about her chosen form revolved around “what painters should or shouldn’t be doing, linked to what the art world was or wasn’t doing/saying.” Some relief came when she left London, to pursue a B.A. at Falmouth College of Arts, in Cornwall, where the discussion was broader, though no less stringent: “If you were going to paint, you had to have a bloody good reason to do it. There was shame involved.”

By the time Yiadom-Boakye returned to London, to do an M.F.A. at the Royal Academy, she had endured many lectures on the death and/or the irrelevance of painting, and her own practice came to reflect some of these debates. Some of her earlier work, by her own admission, uses narrative literally, with both image and title supporting each other tautologically. From the Beckwith

interview: “Four black girls standing with headphones on plugged into the floor, basically taking instructions from the devil, and its title was: ‘The Devil Made me do it.’ . . . I hadn’t really defined a style yet. Because I hadn’t got to grips with painting yet, I ignored the actual power that painting could have; I didn’t trust that paint could do anything.”

In the early aughts, her work began to feature rather cartoonish figures, which perhaps owe something to George Condo’s grotesques, and carry with them the strong sense of a young artist giving herself a deliberate handicap, or, to put it another way, a series



*"Mercy Over Matter" (2017). The paintings say little, explicitly, but you hear much.*

of exploratory formal constraints. In these works, blackness seems to be depicted from the outside and therefore appears—as blackness is often seen, by others—under the sign of monstrosity. (A parallel example is Kerry James Marshall's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (1980), in which the artist appears as a grinning, minstrel-like mask.) Asked, in an e-mail, about this earlier style, Yladiom-Boakyre re-

plied, "It must have been a reaction to a lot of what was said to me. Humour and horror made sense because that was how I felt. Often-times it really worked, other times it was hugely dissatisfying. I think that's why I got rid of so much of it as I went along. Over time I realised I needed to think less about the subject and more about the painting. So I began to think very seriously about colour, light and composition. The more I worked, the more

I came to realise that the power was in the painting itself. My 'colour politics' took on a whole new meaning."

One of the most persistent misapprehensions that exists between artists and viewers—and writers and readers—concerns the relative weight of content and form. Just as, in the mind of a writer, individual novels will tend, privately, to be considered not "the one in which John kills Jane" or "the one in which Kwame gets married" but, rather, "the one with the semi-colons" or "the one in which I realized the possibility of commas," so that which looks like figuration to a layman like me ("Isn't that a beautiful fellow with his owl?") is, for the artist, as much about paint itself—its various possibilities, moods and effects, limits and freedoms. In nonfigurative work, these technical preoccupations are perhaps easier to spot, but, whether a human figure can be discerned in the work or no, the same battles with color, light, composition, and tone apply. One way to track intellectual movements in the arts is to follow the rise and fall of content versus form (as Susan Sontag, in her essay "On Style," pointed out not long after Greenberg effected his great separation of the abstract from the figurative). Falsely separating the two—and then insisting on the elevation of one over the other—happens periodically, and often has the useful side effect of revitalizing the art practice of the time, repressing what has become overly familiar or championing the new or the previously ignored.

"Sensation" marked Britain's parochial, delayed response to thirty years of complex aesthetic theory (mostly French and American) that had privileged content (in the form of "the concept") over form, but it also fatally and impurely mixed these ideas with the careerism of the Y.B.A.s themselves, who contributed their own professional anxieties, dressed up in contempt. Portraiture came to be considered "content," and therefore a subject that could be exhausted, despite (or maybe because of) its long, exalted history. And, once it was deemed to be exhausted, the consensus was that only the most hubristic (or nostalgic) young British artist would dare attempt it. *What is she trying to prove? Who does she think*



*she is—an Old Master?* If you were a student in art school at the time, these debates could sound as much personal as theoretical. Over the years, Yiadom-Boakye has responded in paint, but also in writing, though always obliquely, as she seems to respond to everything. Some of her stories and poems involve people, and many more involve animals, but all of them have the sly, wise tone of fable. In a typically Kafkaesque short prose poem, “Plans of the Night,” she gives to an owl and a “Deeply Skeptical Pigeon” the role of artist and antagonist:

It was possible to perform the feats for  
which he was famed

During the Day.

But for the Owl there was something  
Infinitely Preferable

About the Night.

The Owl had difficulty explaining this  
to other birds.

The same difficulty, I imagine, that a young, talented painter at Saint Martins in the late nineties might have had explaining her preference for portraiture:

The Pigeon argued that the Owl’s  
insistence on a Nocturnal Routine

Had more to do with Self-Mythologizing  
and

By extension, Self-Agrandisement

Than any Practical Need.

But in fact the Owl has “his mind on other things.” He is an owl obsessed with practice itself, which, in his case, involves the hunting of a mouse in the grass. But the Skeptical Pigeon won’t let it go:

“This Mystery, it’s not real you know.  
You’re as dull and predictable as the Rest  
of Us.”

The Owl, silent, focusses on his prey. Meanwhile, the Pigeon continues to upbraid him for his unseemly ambition:

“How appropriate! Always sat a Bough or  
two higher than the Rest of Us, looking  
down on everyone as usual.” . . .

“You think you’re Special, that you have  
some Authority over the Night.”

The Owl, no longer listening, readies himself to swoop and catch that mouse,

but, when he finally does so, his wing smacks the Pigeon in his head, breaking his neck and killing him. Cold comfort—the mouse, who has witnessed it all, escapes:

The Owl, a Bird of Few Words, cursed the  
Pigeon for depriving him of a meal . . .

The Owl decided to go in search of  
something substantial

Like a rabbit or a mole or a skunk.

“**U**nder-Song For A Cipher” is substantial. There is an owl-like virtuosity to it, silent, unassuming—but deadly. Not yet forty, Yiadom-Boakye is a long way down the path to “mastery,” and you do not doubt she will reach her destination. But the past two decades of art criticism have not been kind to formal mastery: it has been considered something inherently suspicious, a message sometimes too swiftly absorbed by artists themselves. From an essay on Yiadom-Boakye, “The Meaning of Restraint,” by the French cultural critic Donatien Grau: “We can sense virtuosity in every inch of the artist’s paintings, but it is always rather subdued, and never blatantly exposed. She makes the decision to not abandon herself in representational extravagance, to rather be discreet in the demonstration of her painterly capacity.”

Those days are done: here is blatant virtuosity, hiding in plain sight, and the restraint has shifted to the narrative itself, which now offers us only as much as we might need to prompt our own creative projections—no more, no less. Many critics have noted that this return to “painterly capacity” is particularly notable in black artists, and, strange indeed, that they should be the gateway—the permission needed—to return to the figurative, to the possibility of virtuosity! Why this might be the case is a fraught question, and Yiadom-Boakye, in her interview with Beckwith, proves herself slyly aware of its implications: “How many times have I heard from someone saying, ‘You’re lucky. You were born with a subject.’ Well, isn’t everyone?”

It’s a familiar, backhanded compliment. *Blackness is in fashion—lucky you!* Implicit is the querulous resentment of the Skeptical Pigeon, who would be

the type to come right out and say it: if these paintings were all of white people, would they have garnered the same attention, the same success? (In 2013, Yiadom-Boakye was short-listed for the Turner Prize, and in the past few years her paintings have begun to sell at auction for prices approaching seven hundred thousand dollars.) Well, the new has an aesthetic value, of this there is no doubt, and it’s one that any smart artist is wise to exploit. But what Yiadom-Boakye does with brown paint and brown people is indivisible. Everyone is born with a subject, but it is fully expressed only through a commitment to form, and Yiadom-Boakye is as committed to her kaleidoscope of browns as Lucian Freud was to the veiny blues and the bruised, sickly yellows that it was his life’s work to reveal, lurking under all that pink flesh. In his case, no one thought to separate form from content, and Yiadom-Boakye’s work is, among other things, an attempt to insist on the same aesthetic unities that white artists take for granted.

“Under-Song For A Cipher.” If it were a novel’s title, we would submit it to textual analysis. *Undersong*: 1. A subordinate or subdued song or strain, esp. one serving as an accompaniment or burden to another. 2. An underlying meaning; an undertone. *Cipher*: 1. A person who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth, a nonentity, a “mere nothing.” 2. A secret or disguised manner of writing, whether by characters arbitrarily invented, or by an arbitrary use of letters or characters in other than their ordinary sense. To these definitions, taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, I’d add the significance of “cipher” in hip-hop: a circle of rappers taking turns to freestyle over a beat. Then, with this knowledge in hand, I might turn to one Yiadom-Boakye painting in particular, “Mercy Over Matter,” in which a man holds a bird on his finger. The undersong here is underplumage: those jewel-like greens and purples and reds you can spot beneath the oil-slick surface of certain black-feathered birds. The man’s jacket magically displays this same underplumage; so does his skin; so does his bird. He is a black man. He is often thought of as a nothing, a cipher. But he has layers upon layers upon layers. ♦

It's a  
Summer  
Day  
*Andrew  
Sean  
Greer*





Arthur Less recalls intercontinental-travel advice that his old flame Freddy once gave him: “They serve you dinner, you take your sleeping pill, they serve you breakfast, you’re there.” Forearmed, Less boards the aircraft, settles into his window seat, chooses the Tuscan chicken (whose ravishing name, like that of an Internet lover, belies the reality—mere chicken and mashed potatoes), and with his Thumbelina bottle of red wine takes a single white capsule. The drug does its duty: he does not remember finishing the Bavarian cream in its little eggcup, nor the removal of his dinner, nor setting his watch to a new time zone. Instead, Less awakens to a plane of sleeping citizens under blue prison blankets. Dreamily happy, he looks at his watch and panics: only two hours have passed! There are still nine to go. Perhaps Freddy, who is fifteen years Less’s junior, did not correctly calculate the dosage for an older, more nervous passenger; or, to be precise, for the middle-aged novelist Arthur Less. On the monitors, a recent American cop comedy is playing. Like any silent movie, it needs no sound to convey its plot. A heist by amateurs. He tries to fall back asleep, his jacket as a pillow; his mind plays a movie of his present life. A heist by amateurs. Less takes a deep breath and fumbles in his bag. He finds another pill and puts it in his mouth. An endless process of dry swallowing that he remembers from taking vitamins as a boy. Then it is done, and he places the thin satin mask over his eyes again, ready to reenter the darkness—

“Sir, your breakfast. Coffee or tea?”  
“What? Uh, coffee.”

Shades are being opened to let in the bright sun above the heavy clouds. Blankets are being put away. Has any time passed? He does not remember sleeping. He looks at his watch—what madman has set it? To what time zone? Singapore? Breakfast; they are about to descend into Frankfurt. And he has just taken a hypnotic. A tray is placed before him: a microwaved croissant with frozen butter and jam. A cup of coffee. Well, he will have to push through. Perhaps the coffee will counteract the sedative. You take an upper for a downer, right? This, Less

reflects as he tries to butter the bread with its companion chunk of ice, is how drug addicts think.

Our novelist is going to Turin for a prize ceremony, although he is not *really* going for a prize ceremony. He is escaping a wedding: that of young Freddy to someone named Tom. He stared at the invitation when it came in the mail—every word embossed so that even the blind could enjoy this humiliation—and, in his panicked state, grasped at other invitations he had received: conferences, symposia, temporary professorships in far-flung locales like Mexico, Germany, Japan. Less dug them up and hastily agreed to all of them so that he could write, with satisfaction, on the R.S.V.P. card: *Dear Freddy and Tom, my apologies, but I will be out of the country.* As it turns out, Less has merely traded one indignity for a series of new ones—in Mexico, Germany, Japan—but first this one in Italy, where he is nominated for a prize no one believes he will win. Not his agent, who urged him to stay home and start a new book; not his sister, who said that this was no way for a man his age to behave; and certainly not Less himself.

In the days leading up to the ceremony there will be interviews, something called a “confrontation” with high-school students, and many luncheons and dinners. He looks forward to escaping from his hotel into the streets of Turin, the secret heart of a city he has always longed to visit. Contained deep within the printed schedule was the information that he is a finalist for a lesser prize; the greater prize has already been awarded to the famous British author Fosters Lancett. He wonders if the poor man is actually coming. Because of the fear Less has of jet lag, he asked to arrive a day before these events were due to start, and for some reason the ceremony organizers acceded. A car, he has been told, will be waiting for him in Turin. If he manages to make it there.

He floats through the Frankfurt Airport in a dream, thinking, Passport, wallet, phone, passport, wallet, phone. On a great blue screen he finds that his flight to Turin has changed terminals. Why, he wonders, are there no clocks in airports? He passes through miles of leather handbags and perfumes and whiskeys, miles of beautiful German and Turkish

retail maids, and, in this dream, he is talking to them about colognes, and letting them giggle and spritz him with scents of leather and musk; he is looking through wallets, and fingering one made of ostrich leather; he is standing at the counter of a V.I.P. lounge and talking to the receptionist, a lady with sea-urchin hair, about his childhood in Delaware, charming his way into the lounge, where businessmen of all nationalities are wearing the same suit; he sits in a cream leather chair, drinks champagne, eats oysters; and there the dream fades. . . .

He awakens in a bus, headed somewhere. But where? Why is he holding so many bags? Why is there the tickle of champagne in his throat? Less tries to listen, among the straphangers, for Italian; he must find the flight to Turin. Around him seem to be American businessmen, talking about sports. Less recognizes the words but not the names. He feels un-American. He feels homosexual. Less notes that there are at least five men on the bus who are taller than himself, which seems like a life record. The shuttle crosses the tarmac and deposits them at an identical terminal. Nightmarishly: passport control. Yes, he still has his in his front-left pants pocket. “*Geschäft*,” he answers the muscular agent (red hair cut so close it seems painted on), secretly thinking, What I do is hardly business. Or pleasure. Security, again. Shoes, belt, off again. What is the logic here? Passport, customs, security, again? Submitting to his bladder at last, Less enters a white-tiled bathroom and sees, in the mirror, an old, balding *Onkel* in wrinkled, oversized clothes. It turns out there is no mirror: it is a businessman across the sink. A Marx Brothers joke. Less washes his own face, not the businessman’s, finds his gate, and boards the plane. Passport, wallet, phone. He sinks into his window seat with a sigh and never gets his second breakfast. He falls instantly to sleep.

Less awakens to a feeling of peace and triumph: “*Stiamo iniziando la nostra discesa verso Torino.* We are beginning our descent into Turin.” He removes his eye mask and smiles at the Alps below—an optical illusion making them into craters and not mountains—and then he sees the city itself. The plane lands serenely, and a woman in the front

applauds. He recalls smoking on an airplane once when he was young, checks his armrest, and finds an ashtray in it still. Charming or alarming? A chime rings, passengers stand up. Passport, wallet, phone. Less has braved his way through the crisis; he no longer feels mickeyed or dull. His bag is the first to arrive on the luggage roller coaster: a dog eager to greet its master. No passport control. Just an exit, and here, wonderfully, a young man in an old man's mustache, holding a sign lettered "SR. ESS." Less raises his hand and the man takes his luggage. Inside the sleek black car, Less finds that his driver speaks no English. *Fantastico*, he thinks, as he closes his eyes again.

Has he been to Italy before? He has, twice. Once when he was twelve, on a trip with his family that took the path of a pachinko game—beginning in Rome, shooting up to London, and falling back and forth between various countries until they landed, at last, back in Italy's slot. Of Rome, all he remembers (in his childish exhaustion) is the stone buildings stained as if hauled from the ocean, the heart-stopping traffic, his father lugging old-fashioned suitcases (including his mother's mysterious makeup kit) across the cobblestones, and the nighttime *click-click-click* of the yellow window shade as it flirted with the Roman wind. His mother, in her final years, often tried to coax other memories from Less (sitting bedside)—“Don't you remember the landlady with the wig that kept falling off? The handsome waiter who offered to drive us to his mother's house for lasagna? The man at the Vatican who wanted to charge you for an adult ticket because you were so tall?” His mother, sitting there with her head wrapped in a scarf with white seashells on it. “Yes,” he said every time, just as he always did with his agent, pretending to have read books he had never even heard of. The wig! Lasagna! The Vatican!

The second time, he went with Robert Brownburn. (Yes, *that* Robert Brownburn, the famous poet, whom Less met on a beach when he was twenty-three and Robert was into his forties.) It was in the middle of their

time together, when Less was finally worldly enough to be a help with travel, and Robert had not become so filled with bitterness that he was a hindrance; the time when a couple finds its balance, and passion quiets from its early scream, but gratitude is still abundant; the moments that no one realizes are the golden years. Robert was in a rare mood for travel, and had accepted an invitation to read at a literary festival. Rome in itself was enough, Robert said, but showing Rome to Less was like having the chance to introduce him to a beloved aunt. Whatever happened would be memorable. What they did not realize until they arrived was that the event was to take place in the ancient Forum, where thousands would gather in the summer wind to listen to a poet read before a crumbling arch; he would be standing on a dais, lit by pink spotlights, with an orchestra playing Philip Glass pieces between each poem. “I will never read anywhere like this again,” Robert whispered to Less, as they stood off to the side. A brief biographical clip was projected for the

audience on an enormous screen: starting with Robert as a boy in a cowboy costume and ending with the face recognizable from his Library of America photograph—hair gone gray and wild, retaining that monkey-business expression of a capering mind. The music swelled, his name was called. Four thousand people applauded, and Robert, in his gray silk suit, readied himself to stride onto a pink-lit stage below the ruins of the centuries, and let go of his lover's hand like someone falling from a cliff. . . .

Less opens his eyes to a countryside of autumn vineyards, endless rows of the crucified plants, a pink rosebush always planted at the end. He wonders why. The hills roll to the horizon, atop each hill a little town, silhouetted with its single church spire and no visible means of approach except with rope and a pick. Less senses by the sun's shift that at least an hour has passed. He is not headed to Turin, then; he is being taken somewhere else. Switzerland?

## LA MIGRA

The grownups sat on their long chair called couch  
And talked of the weather, the dew of the blossoms' morning,  
And what might happen to us, the children.  
Mom said don't leave the house, not without  
Papers. Do I dare speak of the papers hoarded  
In corners? How many more poems can you write  
About a face spackled with fear before  
It holds you? The reader aiming, too.  
Let us find a charcoaled corner, you and I,  
Where we will lay these words. Leave children  
To sleep in windowless rooms. The mother  
Biting a prayer. The country weaving a tomb.

—José Antonio Rodríguez



Less understands at last what is happening: he is in the wrong car.

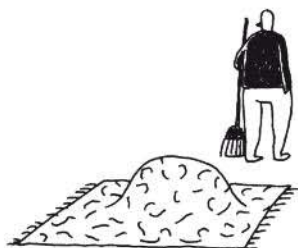
SR. ESS. He anagrams in his mind what he took, in his lingering hypnosis and pride, for “Signor” and a childlike misspelling of Less. Sriramathan Ess? Srovinka Esskatarinavitch? SRESS—Società di la Repubblica Europea per la Sessualità delli Studentesca? Almost anything makes sense to Less in his current state. But it is obvious: having cleared the hurdles of travel, he let his guard slip, waved at the first sign resembling his name, and was whisked away to an unknown location. He knows life’s *com-media dell’arte*, and how he has been cast. He sighs in his seat. Staring out at a shrine to an auto accident, placed at a particularly rough curve in the road, he feels the Madonna’s plastic eyes meet his for an instant.

And now the signs for a particular town become more frequent, and a particular hotel—something called Mondolce Golf Resort. Less stiffens in fear. His narrating mind whittles the possibilities down: he has taken the car of a Dr. Ludwig Ess, some vacationing Austrian doctor, who is off to a Piedmontese golf resort with his wife. Him: brown-skulled, with white hair in puffs over his ears, little steel glasses, red shorts and suspenders. Frau Ess: cropped blond hair with a streak of pink, rough cotton tunics and chili-pepper leggings. Walking sticks packed in their luggage for jaunts to the village. She has signed up for courses in Italian cooking, while he dreams of nine holes and nine Morettis. And now they stand in some hotel lobby in Turin, shouting at the proprietor while a bell-boy waits, holding the elevator. Why did Less come a day early? There will be no one from the prize foundation to straighten out the misunderstanding; the poor Ess voices will echo emptily up to the lobby chandelier. “Benvenuto,” a sign reads above the entrance, “al Mondolce Golf Resort.” A glass box on a hill, a pool, golf holes all around. “*Ecco*,” the driver announces as they pull in; the late-afternoon sunlight flashes on the pool. Two beautiful young women emerge from the entryway’s hall of mirrors, hands clasped. Less readies himself for full mortification.

But life has pardoned him at the scaffold steps:

“Welcome,” the tall one in the seahorse-print dress says, “to Italy and to your hotel! Mr. Less, we are greet you from the prize committee. . . .”

The other finalists do not arrive until late the following day, so Less has almost twenty-four hours in the golf resort by himself. Like a child, he swims and sits in the sauna, the cold-plunge pool, the steam room, the cold plunge again, until he is as scarlet as a fever victim. Freddy would find this amusing if he were here, just as Less himself once found Robert’s exertions on the tennis court amusing. Unable to decipher the menu in the restaurant (a shimmering greenhouse where Less dines alone), for three meals he orders something he recalls from a novel—*fassona*, a tartare of local veal. For three meals he orders the same Nebbiolo. Less sits in the sunlit glass room like the last human on earth, with a wine cellar to last him a lifetime. Surely Freddy would find this amusing as well. There is an amphora of petunia-like flowers on his private deck, worried day and night by little bees. On closer inspection, Less sees that instead of stingers the creatures have long noses to probe the purple flowers. Not bees: hummingbird moths. The discovery delights him to his core. From his balcony at night, he watches the twinkling lights of the nearby townlet and, sitting above it like a



judge, the dark outline of a monastery. Less’s pleasures are tainted only slightly the following afternoon, when a group of teen-agers appear at the edge of the pool and stare as he does his laps. He returns to his room, all Swedish whitened wood with a steel fireplace hanging on the wall. “There is wood in the room,” the seahorse lady said. “You know how to light a fire, yes?” He stacks the wood in a little Cub Scout tepee, and stuffs the underspace with

*Corriere della Sera* and lights the thing. Time for his rubber bands.

Less has, for years, travelled with a set of rubber bands that he thinks of as his portable gym—multicolored, with a set of interchangeable handles. He always imagines, when he coils them into his luggage, how toned and fit he will be when he returns. The ambitious routine begins in earnest the first night of any journey, with dozens of special techniques recommended in the manual (which he lost long ago in Los Angeles, but remembers in part); they involve wrapping the bands around the legs of beds, columns, and rafters, and performing what the manual called “lumberjacks,” “trophies,” and “action heroes.” He ends his workout lacquered in sweat, feeling that he has beat back another day from time’s assault. The second night, he advises himself to let his muscles repair. The third, he begins the routine with half a heart as the thin walls of the room tremble with a neighbor’s television. Less promises himself a better workout in a day or two. In return for this promise: a doll-house whiskey from the room’s doll-house bar. And then the bands are forgotten, abandoned on the side table: a slain dragon.

Less is no athlete. His single moment of greatness came one spring afternoon when he was ten. In the suburbs of Delaware, spring meant not young love and damp flowers but an ugly divorce from winter and a second marriage to bimbo summer. The steam-room setting came on automatically in May, cherry and plum blossoms turned the slightest wind into a ticker-tape parade, and the air filled with pollen. Schoolteachers heard the boys giggling at the sweat shine of their bosoms; young roller-skaters found themselves stuck in softening asphalt. It was the year the cicadas returned; Less had not been alive when they buried themselves in the earth. But now they returned: tens of thousands of them, horrifying but harmless, drunk-driving through the air so that they bumped into heads and ears, encrusting telephone poles and parked cars with their delicate, amber-hued, almost Egyptian discarded shells. Girls wore them as earrings. Boys (Tom Sawyer’s descendants) trapped the live ones in paper bags and released them at study hour. At night, the creatures hummed in huge choruses, the sound

pulsing around the neighborhood. And school would not end until late June. If ever.

Picture young Less: ten years old, in his first year of wearing the gold-rimmed glasses that would return to him, thirty years later, when a Paris shopkeeper recommended a pair and a thrill of sad recognition and shame coursed through his body—the tall boy in glasses in right field, his hair as gold-white as old ivory, covered now by a black-and-yellow baseball cap, wandering in the clover with a dreamy look in his eyes. Nothing has happened in right field all season, which is why he was put there, a kind of athletic Canada. His father (though Less would not know this for more than a decade) had to attend a meeting of the Public Athletics Board to defend his son's right to participate in the softball league, despite his clear lack of talent and his obliviousness on the field. His father actually had to remind his son's coach (who had recommended Less's removal) that it was a public athletic league and, like a public library, was open to all. Even the fumbling oafs among us. And his mother, a softball champ in her day, has had to pretend that none of this matters to her at all, and drives Less to games with a speech about sportsmanship that is more a dismantling of her own beliefs than a relief to the boy. Picture Less with

his leather glove weighing down his left hand, sweating in the spring heat, his mind lost in the reverie of his childhood lunacies before they give way to adolescent lunacies—when an object appears in the sky. Acting almost on a species memory, he runs forward, the glove before him. The bright sun spangles his vision. And—*thwack*. The crowd is screaming. He looks into the glove and sees, gloriously grass-bruised and double-stitched in red, the single catch of his life span.

From the stands: his mother's ecstatic cry.

From his bag in Piedmont: the famous rubber bands uncoiled for the famous childhood hero.

From the room's doorway: the seahorse lady bursting in, opening windows to let out the smoke from Less's botched attempt at a fire.

Less has read (in the packet the beautiful women handed him before vanishing into the hotel's glasswork) that, while the five finalists for the prize were chosen by an elderly committee, the final jury is made up of twelve high-school students. The second night, they appear in the lobby, dressed up in elegant flowered dresses (the girls) or their dads' oversized blazers (the boys). Why did it not occur to Less that these were the same

teens he'd seen by the pool? The teens move like a tour group into the greenhouse, formerly Less's private dining room, which now bustles with waiters and unknown people. The beautiful Italian women reappear, and introduce him to his fellow-finalists. Less feels his confidence drop. The first is Riccardo, a young, unshaven Italian man, incredibly tall and thin, in sunglasses, jeans, and a T-shirt that reveals Japanese-carp tattoos on both arms. The other three are all much older: Luisa, glamorously white-haired and dressed in a white linen dress, with gold alien bracelets for fending off critics; Vittorio, a cartoon villain with streaks of white at his temples, a pencil mustache, and black plastic spectacles that narrow his look of disapproval; and a short rose-gold gnome from Finland who asks to be called Harry, though the name on his books is something else entirely. Their prize entries, Less is told, are a Sicilian historical novel, a retelling of Rapunzel in modern-day Russia, an eight-hundred-page novel about a man's last minute on his deathbed in Paris, and an imagined life of St. Margorie. Less cannot seem to match each work with its author; did the young one write the deathbed novel or Rapunzel? Either seems likely. They are all so intellectual. Less knows at once he hasn't a chance.

"I read your book," Luisa says, her left eye batting away a loose scrap of mascara while her right one stares straight into his heart. "It took me to new places. I thought of Joyce in outer space." The Finn seems to be brimming with mirth.

The cartoon villain interjects, "He would not live long, I think."

"Portrait of the Artist as a Spaceman!" the Finn says at last, and covers his mouth as he ticks away with silent laughter.

"I have not read it but . . ." the tattooed author says, moving restlessly, hands in pockets. The others wait for more. But that is all. Behind them, Less recognizes Fosters Lancett walking alone into the room, very short and heavy-headed, and looking as soaked in misery as a trifle pudding is soaked in rum. And perhaps also soaked in rum.

"I don't think I have a chance of winning" is all Less can say. The prize is a generous number of euros and a bespoke suit from Turin proper.

Luisa flings a hand into the air. "Oh, but who knows? It is up to these students!



*"How come we always have to watch the same old security footage of how we met?"*



Who knows what they love? Romance? Murder? If it's murder, Vittorio has us beat."

The villain raises first one eyebrow, then the other. "When I was young, all I wanted to read was pretentious little books. Camus and Fournier and Calvino. If it had a plot, I hated it," he says.

"You remain this way," Luisa chides, and he shrugs. Less senses a love affair from long ago. The two switch to Italian, and begin what sounds like a squabble but could really be anything at all.

"Do any of you happen to speak English or have a cigarette?" It is Lancett, glowering under his eyebrows. The tattooed writer immediately pulls a pack from his jeans and produces one, slightly flattened. Lancett eyes it with trepidation, then takes it. "You are the finalists?" he asks.

"Yes," Less says, and Lancett turns his head, alert to an American accent.

His eyelids flutter closed in disgust. "These things are not cool."

"I guess you've been to a lot of them." Less hears himself saying this inane thing.

"Not many. And I've never won. It's a sad little cockfight they arrange because they have no talent themselves."

"You have won. You won the main prize here."

Fosters Lancett stares at Less for a moment, then rolls his eyes and stalks off to smoke.

For the next two days, the crowd moves in packs—teen-agers, finalists, elderly prize committee—smiling at one another as they stroll into the local village (the monastery is just as imposing by day), passing peacefully by one another at catered buffets, but never seated together, never interacting. Only Fosters Lancett moves freely among them as the skulking lone wolf. Less now feels a new shame that the teen-agers have seen him nearly naked, and avoids the pool if they are present; in his mind he sees the horror of his middle-aged body, and cannot bear the judgment (when in fact his anxiety has kept him almost as lean as he was in his college years). He also shuns the spa. And so the old rubber bands are brought out again, and each morning Less gives his Lessian best to the "trophies" and "action heroes" of the long-lost manual, each day doing fewer and fewer, asymptotically

approaching, but never reaching, zero.

Days, of course, are crowded. There is the sunny town-square luncheon al fresco where Less is cautioned not once, not twice, but ten times by various Italians to apply sunscreen to his pinkening face (of course he has applied sunscreen, and what the hell do they know about it, with their luscious mahogany skin?). There is the speech by Fosters Lancett on Ezra Pound, in the middle of which Lancett pulls out an electronic cigarette and begins to puff away; its little green light, at this time alien to the Piedmontese, makes some journalists present conjecture that he is smoking their local marijuana. There are numerous baffling interviews—"I am sorry, I need the *interprete*, I cannot understand your American accent"—in which dowdy matrons in lavender linen ask highly intellectual questions about Homer, Joyce, and quantum physics. Less, completely below the journalistic radar in America, and unused to substantive questions, sticks to a fiercely merrymaking persona at all times, refusing to wax philosophical on subjects he chose to write about precisely because he does not understand them. The ladies leave amused but with insufficient copy for a column. From across the lobby, Less hears journalists laughing at something Vittorio is saying; clearly, he knows how to handle these things. And there is the two-hour bus ride up a mountain, when Less turns to Luisa with a question, and she explains that the roses at the ends of the vineyard rows are to detect parasites. She shakes her finger and says, "The roses will be eaten first. Like a bird . . . what is the bird?"

"A canary in a coal mine."

"*Esatto*."

"Or like a poet in a Latin-American country," Less offers. "The new regime always kills them first." The complex triple take of her expression: first astonishment, then wicked complicity, and, finally, shame for either the dead poets, themselves, or both.

And then there is the prize ceremony itself.

Less was in the apartment when Robert received the call, back in 1992. "Well, holy fuck," came the cry from the bedroom, and Less rushed in, thinking Robert had injured himself (he carried

on a dangerous intrigue with the physical world, and chairs, tables, shoes, all came rushing into his path as if to an electromagnet) but finding him bassett-faced, the phone in his lap. In a T-shirt, his tortoiseshell glasses on his forehead, the newspaper spread around him, a cigarette dangerously close to lighting it, Robert turned to face Less. "It was the Pulitzer committee," he said evenly. "It turns out I've been pronouncing it wrong all these years."

"You won?"

"It's not Pew-lit-sir. It's Pull-it-sir."

Robert's eyes took a survey of the room. "Holy fuck, Arthur, I won."

This ceremony takes place not in the ancient monastery itself, where one can buy honey produced by cloistered bees, but in a municipal hall built into the rock beneath the monastery. Being a place of worship, it lacked a dungeon, and so the region of Piedmont has built one. In the auditorium (whose rear-access door is open to the weather: a sudden storm brewing), the teen-agers are arrayed exactly as Less imagines the hidden monks to be—with devout expressions and vows of silence. The elderly chairpeople sit at a kingly table; they also do not speak. The only speaker is a handsome Italian (the mayor, it turns out), whose appearance on the podium is announced by a crack of thunder; the sound fails on his microphone; the lights go out. The audience says, "Aaaa!" Less hears the tattooed writer, seated beside him in the darkness, lean over and speak to him at last: "This is when someone is murdered. But who?" Less whispers "Fosters Lancett" before realizing that the famous Brit is seated behind them.

The lights awake the room again, and no one has been murdered. A movie screen begins to unroll noisily from the ceiling like a mad relative wandering downstairs and has to be sent back into hiding. The ceremony recommences, and as the mayor begins his speech in Italian, those mellifluous, seesawing, meaningless harpsichord words, Less feels his mind drifting away like a spaceman from an airlock, off into the asteroid belt of his own concerns. For he does not belong here. It seemed absurd when he got the invitation, but seen so abstractly, and at such a remote distance in time and space, he accepted it as part of his get-

away plan. But here, in his suit, sweat already beginning to dot the front of his white shirt and bead on his thinning hairline, he knows that it is utterly wrong. He did not take the wrong car; the wrong car took him. For he has come to understand that this is not a strange, funny Italian prize, a joke to tell his friends; it is very real. The elderly judges in their jewelry; the teens in their jury box; the finalists all quivering and angry with expectation; even Fosters Lancett, who has come all this way, and written a long speech, and charged his electronic cigarette and his dwindling battery of small talk—it is very real, very important to them. It cannot be dismissed as a lark. Instead, it is a vast mistake.

Less begins to imagine (as the mayor doodles on in Italian) that he has been mistranslated. Or, what is the word? Supertranslated? His novel given to an unacknowledged genius of a poet (Giuliana Senino is her name) who worked his mediocre English into breathtaking Italian. His book was ignored in America, barely reviewed, without a single interview request by a journalist (his publicist said, "Autumn is a bad time"), but, here in Italy, he understands he is taken seriously. In autumn, no less. Just this morning, he was shown the articles in *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, local papers, and Catholic papers, with photographs of him in his blue suit gazing upward at the camera with the same worried, unsophisticated sapphire gaze he showed to Robert on the beach when they met, the same gaze he showed to Freddy on their last morning together. But it should be a photograph of Giuliana Senino. She has written this book. Rewritten, upwritten, outwritten Less himself. For he has known genius. He has been awakened by genius in the middle of the night, by the sound of genius pacing the halls; he has made genius his coffee, and his breakfast, and his ham sandwich, and his tea; he has been naked with genius, coaxed genius from panic, brought genius's pants from the tailor, and ironed his shirts for a reading. He has felt every inch of genius's skin; he has known genius's smell, and felt genius's touch. Fosters Lancett, a knight's move away, for whom an hour-long talk on Ezra Pound is a simple matter—he is a genius. Vittorio in his Oilcan Harry mustache, the

elegant Luisa, the perverted Finn, the tattooed Riccardo: possible geniuses. How has it come to this? What God has enough free time to arrange this very special humiliation, to fly a minor novelist across the world so that he can feel, in some seventh sense, the minuscule of his own worth? Decided by high-school students, in fact. Is there a bucket of blood hanging high in the auditorium rafters, waiting to be dropped on his bright-blue suit? It is a mistake, or a setup, or both. But there is no escaping it now.

And further: "You think it's love, Arthur? It isn't love." Robert ranting in their hotel room before the lunchtime Pulitzer ceremony in New York. Tall and lean as the day they met; gone gray, of course, his face worn with age ("I'm dog-eared as a book"), but still the figure of elegance and intellectual fury. Standing there in silver hair before the bright window: "Prizes aren't love. Because people who never met you can't love you. The slots for winners are already set, from here until Judgment Day. They know the kind of poet who's going to win, and if you happen to fit the slot, then bully for you! It's like fitting a hand-me-down suit. It's luck, not love. Not that it isn't nice to have luck. Maybe the only way to think about it is being at the center of all beauty. Just by chance, today we get to be at the center of all beauty. It doesn't mean I don't want it. It's a desperate way to get off, but I do. I'm a narcissist; desperate is what we do. Getting off is what we do. You look handsome in your suit. I don't know why you're shackled up with a man in his fifties. Oh, I know, you like a finished product. You don't want to Add-A-Pearl. Let's have champagne before we go. I know it's noon. I need you to do my bow tie. I forget how because I know you'll never forget. Prizes aren't love, but this is love. What Frank wrote: 'It's a summer day, and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world.'"

More thunder unsettles Less from his thoughts. But it isn't thunder; it is applause, and the young writer is pulling at Less's coat sleeve. For Arthur Less has won. ♦

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Andrew Sean Greer on literary prizes.



# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## DANCE WITH THE DRAGON

*Are the United States and China on a collision course?*

BY IAN BURUMA

Overheated topics invariably produce ill-considered books. Some people will remember the time, in the late nineteen-eighties, when Japan was about to buy up America and conquer the world. Many a tidy sum was made on that premise. These days, the possibility of war with China is stirring emotions and keeping publishers busy. A glance at a few new books suggests what scholars and journalists are think-

ing about the prospect of an Asian conflagration; the quality of their reflections is, to say the least, variable.

The worst of the bunch, Graham Allison's "Destined for War" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), may also be the most influential, given that its thesis rests on a catchphrase Allison has popularized, "Thucydides's Trap." Even China's President, Xi Jinping, is fond of quoting it. "On the current trajec-

tory," Allison contends, "war between the U.S. and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized." The reason, he says, can be traced to the problem described in the fifth century B.C.E. in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Sparta, as the established power, felt threatened by the rising might of Athens. In such conditions, Allison writes, "not just



*"You can't always blame everything on the crows."*

extraordinary, unexpected events, but even ordinary flashpoints of foreign affairs, can trigger large-scale conflict."

Allison sees Thucydides' Trap in the wars between a rising England and the established Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, a rising Germany versus Britain in the early twentieth century, and a rising Japan versus the United States in the nineteen-forties. Some historical tensions between rising powers and ruling ones were resolved without a catastrophic war (the Soviet challenge to U.S. dominance), but many, Allison warns, were not. And there's no disputing China's steep military and economic rise in recent decades. Its annual military budget has, for most of the past decade, increased by double digits, and the People's Liberation Army, even in its newly streamlined form, has nearly a million more active service members than the United States has. As recently as 2004, China's economy was less than half that of the United States. Today, in terms of purchasing-power parity, China has left the United States behind. Allison

is so excited by China's swift growth that his prose often sounds like a mixture of a Thomas Friedman column and a Maoist propaganda magazine like *China Reconstructs*. Rome wasn't built in a day? Well, he writes, someone "clearly forgot to tell the Chinese. By 2005, the country was building the square-foot equivalent of today's Rome every two weeks."

Allison underrates the many problems that could slow things down quite soon: China's population is aging so rapidly that an ever smaller pool of young people will have to support a growing number of old people, who lack proper welfare provisions; the country is an ecological disaster zone; the dead hand of Communist Party control makes necessary economic reforms difficult; innovative thinking is hampered by censorship; and so on. In terms of military hardware—aircraft carriers and the like—China still lags well behind the United States. And the United States has a wide network of allies in Asia, while China has almost none. Still, China plainly aspires to be the dominant power in East

and Southeast Asia, and this is making the United States and its allies increasingly nervous. Southeast Asians are spooked by Chinese claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea, bolstered by the construction of artificial islands with landing grounds. Japan, although it has a substantial military force, is saddled with a pacifist constitution. South Korea doesn't quite know whether to resist Chinese domination or cozy up to it. The British historian Michael Howard's remark about nineteenth-century France, quoted in Allison's book, could easily apply to the United States today. The "most dangerous of all moods," Howard said, is "that of a great power which sees itself declining to the second rank."

Allison finds risks of Thucydides' Trap on both sides of the divide: the rising power feels frustrated and the established one feels threatened. The thesis, in those general terms, isn't implausible. His book would be more persuasive, however, if he knew more about China. Allison's only informants on the subject appear to be Henry Kissinger and the late Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, both of whom he regards with awe. This leads to some odd contradictions and a number of serious historical howlers. On one page, quoting Kissinger quoting the ancient military strategist Sun Tzu, Allison assures us that China likes to outclass its enemies without using force. On a later page, he warns us that Chinese leaders may use military force "preemptively to surprise a stronger opponent who would not have done likewise." Allison says that he wishes, with "my colleague Niall Ferguson," to set up a council of historians to advise the U.S. President, and yet his own grasp of history appears to be rather shaky. He imagines that George Kennan's Long Telegram in 1946 argued that "America could survive only by destroying the USSR, or transforming it"; Kennan's argument was, rather, that Soviet aggression needed to be contained. Contrary to Lee's propaganda, Singapore was far from an "inconsequential fishing village" when Lee came to power, in the nineteen-fifties. (It was already a populous and significant port city.) Twenty-three million Chinese did not flee to Taiwan to escape Mao



(the number is more like two million) and build “a successful democracy” (the native Taiwanese mostly did that). And how does Allison know that “few in China would say that political freedoms are more important than reclaiming China’s international standing and national pride”? Lee Kuan Yew may have told him that. But, given the absence of freedom of speech in China, we cannot know.

For all that, China’s challenge to the established postwar order needs to be taken seriously. Gideon Rachman, the *Financial Times* foreign-affairs commentator, considers China’s increasing clout in the broader context of what he calls, in a remarkably ugly phrase, “Easternization,” which is also the title of his well-written new survey (just published by Other Press). The gravity of economic and military power, he argues, is moving from West to East. He is thinking of more than the new class of Chinese billionaires; he includes India, a country that might one day surpass even China as an economic powerhouse, and reminds us that Japan has been one of the world’s largest economies for some time now. Tiny South Korea ranks fourteenth in the world in purchasing-power parity. And the Asian megacities are looking glitzier by the day. Anyone who flies into J.F.K. from any of the metropolitan areas in China, let alone from Singapore or Tokyo, can readily see what Rachman has in mind. There is a great deal going on in Asia. The question is what this will mean, and whether “Easternization” is an illuminating concept for understanding it.

One difficulty is that East and West are slippery categories. The concept of European civilization has at least some measure of coherence. The same can be said for Chinese civilization, extending to Vietnam in the south and Korea in the north. But what unifies “the East”? Korea has almost nothing in common with India, apart from a tenuous connection through ancient Buddhist history. Japan is a staunch U.S. ally and its contemporary culture is, in many respects, closer to the West than to anything particularly Eastern. Previous attempts to create a sense of Pan-Asian solidarity, such as the Japanese

imperialist mission in the nineteen-thirties and forties, have been either futile or disastrous.

In fact, many of Rachman’s informants belong to an international elite that cannot be easily pinned down to East or West. It is refreshing that he does not depend on Lee Kuan Yew or Henry Kissinger for his knowledge of Asia, but his is still very much a view from the top. This isn’t a criticism: we want to know what senior diplomats, government ministers, heads of state, and well-connected academics think. But, if we’re trying to understand a large number of diverse Asian countries, the approach has its limitations.

Since the struggle for dominance in East and Southeast Asia is the hot topic at hand, the bulk of Rachman’s book concerns that question, and he has interesting things to say about it, even though his conclusion is a trifle lame. He does not argue that China seeks to rule the world. But he does claim, persuasively, that “the question of whether and how the Americans should resist Chinese ambitions in the Asia-Pacific is likely to be the most critical issue in international relations over the coming decades since it pits the world’s two most powerful nations against each other.”

Behind that tension is a clash between two competing forms of nationalism. The pride in the glorious poetry of the Tang dynasty, the sophisticated



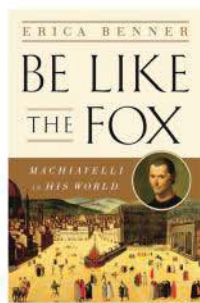
statecraft of the Han dynasty, or the fine arts of the Ming is less prominent than reminders of historical hurts. Contemporary Chinese nationalism—propagated in schools, museums, monuments, television series, movies, and political speeches—increasingly rests on that most explosive of goals: wiping out the national humiliations of the past. In particular, there’s a desire to avenge the sufferings inflicted in the past century and a half, notably by the

British in the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars, and by the Japanese in the nineteen-thirties and forties. The Chinese Communist Party still pays lip service on occasion to Marx, Lenin, and Mao, but the main message is clear: only under its steady leadership will China be a great power again, one that will not only show Japan and other peripheral powers their proper place but also make sure that past indignities at the hands of the West will never be repeated. This is the core of what Xi Jinping, the country’s most authoritarian leader since Mao, calls the “Chinese Dream.” Allison, curiously, compares this dream to F.D.R.’s New Deal. (Even more curiously, he cites Lee Kuan Yew’s comparison of Xi with Nelson Mandela.) In fact, the dream is nationalist through and through: hatred of Japan is officially encouraged, and so is resentment of the United States.

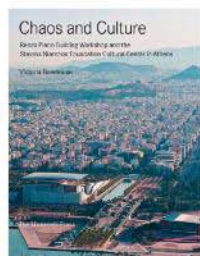
Rachman claims that the Party’s embrace of this aggrieved type of nationalism “can be dated quite precisely” to June, 1989, when Deng Xiaoping decided to crack down violently on the peaceful protests against one-party rule—not just in Tiananmen Square but all over China. After having gunned down its own citizens, the regime promoted nationalism in order to restore the tarnished legitimacy of Communist Party rule. In fact, “patriotic education” focussing on the shame of the past began earlier than that. When, in the early nineteen-eighties, Deng Xiaoping opened China’s doors to capitalism, and is thought to have used the slogan “To get rich is glorious,” nationalism began to replace Maoism as the official ideology. After the horrors of Mao’s bloody purges and man-made famines, Communist ideals no longer convinced many Chinese. So Deng was faced with the problem of how to make one-party rule acceptable. He also had to cover himself against accusations of selling out to the former enemy by courting Japanese investments and cheap loans. This is why, in 1985, the massive Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall was built, reminding people of the slaughter perpetrated in that city by Japanese troops in 1937—a slaughter to which little attention had previously been paid.

Since nationalism is now the main

## BRIEFLY NOTED



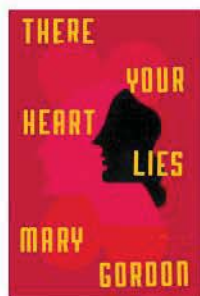
**Be Like the Fox**, by Erica Benner (Norton). Machiavelli's "The Prince" is famous for its cool espousal of political expediency, but for fifteen years before Machiavelli wrote it, in 1513, he championed popular republicanism, working tirelessly, if ultimately unsuccessfully, to prevent Florence from returning to Medici rule. In this tightly composed narrative of Machiavelli's life and thought, Benner argues that "The Prince" is a work of secret subversion, using irony and beguilement to advance a staunchly republican message. Anchoring her study in contemporary styles of discourse—Florentines were known for "self-protective, ambiguous speech"—Benner produces a gripping portrait of a brilliant political thinker, who understood the dangers of authoritarianism and looked for ways to curb them even though independent speech had become impossible.



**Chaos and Culture**, by Victoria Newhouse (Monacelli). In 2006, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation set out to build a grand cultural center for Athens. Then the country slipped into economic disaster. So this account of the project, which was designed by Renzo Piano, is also a sweeping tale of national identity and artistic anxiety. Newhouse ably balances discussion of details—Piano's abstract, balletic sketches are reproduced here along with handsome aerial photographs of the site—with the drama of the financial stakes and personalities involved. As the foundation tries to hold the government to its promises, archeological excavations uncover the remains of ancient prisoners, and seismic tremors threaten—and sometimes miraculously realign—walls.



**The Night Ocean**, by Paul La Farge (Penguin). La Farge's fourth novel is a playfully disorienting tour through the biography of the horror master H. P. Lovecraft, as well as a portrait of a number of men, both fictional and real, who try to decode his life and work. A Lovecraft aficionado attempting to understand the nature of Lovecraft's relationship with a much younger man finds an account of their sex life in a mysteriously annotated book—the "Erotonomicon"—that purports to contain Lovecraft's diaries. La Farge has great fun constructing texts with contradictory information about the young man, the most entertaining of which involves William S. Burroughs, the strangest Lovecraftian of all.



**There Your Heart Lies**, by Mary Gordon (Pantheon). When a young woman breaks with her wealthy East Coast Catholic family to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War, she arrives with little beyond "the vague ideas of a privileged girl." This novel toggles between her years in Spain, bringing up a child she has with a Spanish doctor, and the memories she shares, in her nineties, back in America, with a granddaughter. The latter scenes lack the eventfulness of the Spanish ones, which are full of rich details, such as the scent of oranges on a hospital worker who has scavenged for food in the street. The novel's preoccupations are the tension between faith and doctrine, and the justification of atrocity in the name of religion.

ideology propping up the legitimacy of China's regime, no Chinese leader can possibly back down from such challenges as Taiwan's desire for independence or Tibetan resistance to Han Chinese rule or anything else that might make China look weak in the eyes of its citizens. This is why Donald Trump's loose talk about revising the One China policy inflamed a mood that is already dangerously combustible. It's worth bearing in mind that "The China Dream" is actually the title of a best-selling book by Colonel Liu Mingfu, whose arguments for China's supremacy in an Asian renaissance sound remarkably like Japanese propaganda in the nineteen-thirties. Rachman quotes him saying that "when China becomes the world's leading nation, it will put an end to Western notions of racial superiority." The only Western power that might stand in the way of this project of Chinese hegemony is the United States.

Since 1945, the United States, with its many bases in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, has effectively played the role of regional policeman. Partly out of institutional habit, partly out of amour propre, and partly out of fear of seeing its power slip, the United States has had its own issues with nationalism, even before Trump came blundering onto the scene. Joseph Nye, the scholar and former U.S. government official, once argued that accepting China's dominance over the Western Pacific would be unthinkable, because "such a response to China's rise would destroy America's credibility." In a conversation with Rachman in 2015, another American official put this in saltier terms: "I know the U.S. navy and it's addicted to pre-eminence. If the Chinese try to control the South China Sea, our guys will fucking challenge that. They will sail through those waters."

American swagger will always have its enthusiasts. Gordon G. Chang, the author of a 2001 book titled "The Coming Collapse of China," recently wrote a piece in *The National Interest* that praised Trump effusively for cutting "the ambitious autocrat down to size" during Xi's visit to Mar-a-Lago. Trump, Chang recounts, arrived late to greet his guest. He announced a missile strike against Syria over the chocolate cake.



He made Xi “look like a supplicant.” Trump may have revelled in this behavior, but Chang’s acclaim is idiotic. Deliberately making the Chinese leader lose face, if that’s what happened, can only worsen a fraught situation. American bluster—the reflex of the current U.S. President in the absence of any coherent policy—is a poor response to Chinese edginess. Now that China has developed missiles that can easily sink aircraft carriers, and the United States is responding with tactical plans that would aim to take out such weapons on the Chinese mainland, a minor conflict could result in a major showdown.

Squeezed between the rivalry of China and the United States are China’s immediate neighbors and America’s allies. They are driven, mostly for domestic reasons, by their own forms of nationalism. Japan and South Korea have competing claims over a group of tiny islands in the Sea of Japan. Old wounds inflicted during the Japanese annexation of Korea between 1910 and 1945 are periodically reopened for political ends in South Korea, and the current Japanese government, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, espouses a hard-right nationalism that downplays Japanese wartime atrocities. Abe wants to revise the postwar pacifist constitution, and his more ardent supporters think that the best way to do so is to present Japan’s past imperialism as a heroic effort to liberate Asia.

Abe’s nationalism is further complicated by its ambivalence toward the United States. The Japanese right has resented American interference in its domestic politics since the postwar occupation, especially when it concerns interpretations of Japan’s wartime past. At the same time, Abe is terrified that the United States might not come to Japan’s rescue against China or North Korea. One of Rachman’s most cogent insights is that having so many Asian allies dependent on U.S. military force may turn out to be a weakness rather than a strength. President Obama, perhaps foolishly, promised Abe in 2014 that the United States would intervene on Japan’s behalf if China were to threaten a number of tiny uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, which

are claimed by both countries. Would the United States really risk a war over a few disputed rocks just for the sake of “credibility”? Rachman concludes his survey with a fine sentiment: “The great political challenge of the twenty-first century will be to manage the process of Easternization in the common interest of humankind.”

**I**n a short book pointedly titled “Avoiding War with China” (University of Virginia), Amitai Etzioni has a more concrete idea of how China should be accommodated. Etzioni, a professor at George Washington University, is no softie. Having escaped from Nazi Germany as a child, he served as a commando in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Etzioni knows what war is like, in contrast to most armchair warriors in Washington or indeed Beijing, and he refuses to get overexcited by China’s martial prowess. China’s military, he writes, “seems to pose no credible threat to the United States in the region, let alone on a global scale. This conclusion is further supported by the observations of how and when China uses its clout.”

Etzioni admits that China has flouted international laws by claiming rights over islands far from its coastlines. It clearly wants to expand its influence from the Siberian borders all the way down to the sea-lanes running along Vietnam and the Philippines. But so far China has used almost no force to achieve its ends. Etzioni is convinced that Chinese policies are more concerned with rhetorical and symbolic assertions than with the outright projection of force. This means that, in his view, there is room for tension-easing compromise. Resources in the South China Sea could perhaps be shared. Certain concessions might be made; this or that island could be developed by China in exchange for territories elsewhere.

At the same time, he insists that there should be “clear red lines.” Certain “core interests” must be defended. The United States would have to intervene if Taiwan were in danger of being invaded. Free travel through sea and air around China has to be maintained. But Etzioni warns against “habitually interpreting Chinese acts of

assertion as aggressive,” which, he says, “is symptomatic of a strategy that holds that China cannot be accommodated and that it must be contained by any means necessary.” This sounds eminently sensible. China’s intentions may, of course, not be quite as benign as Etzioni claims, and any territorial concession by the United States is likely to be read as a sign of weakness both by China and by America’s regional allies. Nonetheless, the United States, which is still the most powerful nation in the Pacific, should resist the temptation of belligerent posturing when it isn’t strictly necessary.

If Etzioni seeks to tone down the threat of China’s rise to power, Howard French, a former *Times* correspondent in China and Japan, attempts to normalize it, in his “Everything Under the Heavens” (Knopf). The book, which I blurbed, is the only one under review that gives us a look at China from the inside as well as from the outside. French knows the country well, and has talked to many more people than the sort you encounter at academic conferences or Davos panels. Like Graham Allison, French explains Chinese politics through its history. But he avoids the kind of cultural generalizations that Lee Kuan Yew was fond of showering on grateful Western interlocutors. He has no truck with the idea, for example, that the Confucian tradition is essentially about obeying authority. Instead, he stresses a political history that helps illuminate territorial conflicts between China and its neighbors. China, traditionally, is neither a nation-state nor a colonial empire, even though it currently includes areas of imperial conquest. The classic view of the world from China’s imperial capital cities took the country to be the center of civilization. The emperors ruled “all under heaven,” or *tianxia*. Peripheral areas, inhabited by less civilized people, would not have to be dominated by force, provided they paid sufficient tribute to the dragon throne. As long as the superiority of the Middle Kingdom was acknowledged, the blessings of Chinese civilization could be shared, and harmony would reign.

It is no wonder, then, that the comparatively recent depredations suffered

by China at the hands of barbarians—particularly of the “dwarf pirates” to the east (i.e., the Japanese)—were so keenly felt. In 1895, a superior Japanese Army humiliated the Chinese empire. A little more than forty years later, Japan caused the deaths of more than fourteen million Chinese. French, Allison, Kissinger, and Lee Kuan Yew all agree on one thing: China’s dream is to restore something of the old order that was lost almost two centuries ago. The Communist Party is effectively stirring up feelings that have been simmering at least since the eighteen-forties.

If Chinese emotions can be easily understood, so can those of the people living in the vicinity. The fact that the Japanese behaved appallingly in the nineteen-thirties doesn’t mean they should be left at the mercy of a regime that murders its own citizens for political reasons. But French agrees with Etzioni that China’s aspirations must be accommodated up to a point. This will mean “stopping China somewhere short of the maximal pursuit of its strategic goals.” French sees the United States as a regional facilitator, helping to strengthen coöperation among its allies. The most salient goal, he rightly observes, is “thickening the web among China’s wary neighbors, who have a shared interest in keeping China from using force to upend the existing order.”

The problem is that the existing order, put in place by the United States after the Second World War, might be exactly what hampers efforts to thicken that web. In a sense, America is experiencing the dilemmas typical of an empire in its twilight years. Imperial powers in the middle of the twentieth century used to argue that they couldn’t withdraw as long as their colonial subjects were not ready to rule themselves. But, as the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan once explained to a rather baffled William F. Buckley, Jr., the continuance of colonial rule would not make them more ready. If the United States were to give up its policing duties in Asia too quickly, chaos might ensue. The longer its Asian allies remain dependent on U.S. military protection, however, the harder it will be for them to take care of themselves.

The most desirable way to balance the rising power of China would be

the creation of a regional defense alliance stretching from South Korea to Burma. Japan, as the leading economic and military power, would be the logical choice to lead such a coalition. This would mean, in an ideal world, that Japan should revise its pacifist constitution after a national debate, led not by a government of chauvinistic revanchists but by a more liberal administration. But we do not live in an ideal world. Abe’s revisionism (he has currently set 2020 as a deadline for the amended constitution) is unlikely to achieve its aims in Japan. Most Japanese are no keener than most Germans to play a major military role once again. And as long as Japanese leaders insist on whitewashing their country’s recent past they will never persuade other countries in the region to trust them.

This is the status quo that dependence on the United States has frozen into place. As much as Abe’s government wishes to remain under the American military umbrella, the American postwar order, including the pacifist constitution, still inflames right-wing resentment. Yet Washington, and especially the Pentagon, which shapes much of U.S. policy in East Asia, has consistently supported conservative governments in Japan, seeing them as an anti-Communist bulwark. Meanwhile, as long as the United States is there to keep the peace, the governments of Japan and South Korea will continue to snipe at each other, instead of strengthening their alliance.

China’s own attitude toward the status quo is far from straightforward. China may dream of sweeping its seas clean of the U.S. Navy. But, if the alternative is the military resurgence of Japan, the Chinese would probably opt for maintaining the Pax Americana. At the moment, though, the United States itself appears to be drifting. Trump has accused Japan of playing the U.S. for a sucker. He has even suggested that Japan and South Korea might build their own nuclear bombs. But the ex-generals and corporate executives who run his foreign policy seem to favor sticking to the world we know. Both of these policies are flawed. There is no ideal solution to the late-imperial dilemma. But the surest way to court disaster is to have no coherent plan at all. ♦



A CRITIC AT LARGE

## THE PROG SPRING

*Was progressive rock the end of pop-music history? Yes and no.*

BY KELEFA SANNEH



*Virtuosos such as the keyboardist Keith Emerson made fans feel like connoisseurs.*

In April, 1971, *Rolling Stone* reviewed the debut album by a band with a name better suited to a law firm: Emerson, Lake & Palmer. The reviewer liked what he heard, although he couldn't quite define it. "I suppose that your local newspaper might call it 'jazz-influenced classical-rock,'" he wrote. In fact, a term was being adopted for this hybrid of highbrow and lowbrow. People called it progressive rock, or prog rock: a genre intent on proving that rock and roll didn't have to be simple and silly—it could be complicated and silly instead. In the early nineteen-seventies, E.L.P., alongside several more or less like-minded British groups—King Crimson, Yes, and Genesis, as well as Jethro Tull and Pink Floyd—went, in the space of a few

years, from curiosities to rock stars. This was especially true in America, where arenas filled up with crowds shouting for more, which was precisely what these bands were designed to deliver. The prog-rock pioneers embraced extravagance: odd instruments and fantastical lyrics, complex compositions and abstruse concept albums, flashy solos and flashier live shows. Concertgoers could savor a new electronic keyboard called a Mellotron, a singer dressed as a batlike alien commander, an allusion to a John Keats poem, and a philosophical allegory about humankind's demise—all in a single song ("Watcher of the Skies," by Genesis). In place of a guitarist, E.L.P. had Keith Emerson, a keyboard virtuoso who liked to wrestle with his customized Ham-

mond organ onstage, and didn't always win: during one particularly energetic performance, he was pinned beneath the massive instrument, and had to be rescued by roadies. Perhaps this, too, was an allegory.

Most of these musicians took seriously the "progressive" in "progressive rock," and believed that they were helping to hurry along an ineluctable process: the development of rock music into what Jon Anderson, of Yes, once called "a higher art form." Even more than most musicians, the prog rockers aimed for immortality. "We want our albums to last," Robert Fripp, the austere guitar scientist behind King Crimson, said. In a literal sense, he got his wish: although the progressive-rock boom was effectively over by the end of the seventies, it left behind a vast quantity of surplus LPs, which filled the bins in used-record stores for decades. (Many people who have never heard this music would nonetheless recognize some of the album covers.) Progressive rock was repudiated by what came next: disco, punk, and the disco-punk genre known as New Wave. Unlike prog rock, this music was, respectively, danceable, concise, and catchy. In the story of popular music, as conventionally told, progressive rock was at best a dead end, and at worst an embarrassment, and a warning to future musical generations: don't get carried away.

The genre's bad reputation has been remarkably durable, even though its musical legacy keeps growing. Twenty years ago, Radiohead released "OK Computer," a landmark album that was profoundly prog: grand and dystopian, with a lead single that was more than six minutes long. But when a reporter asked one of the members whether Radiohead had been influenced by Genesis and Pink Floyd, the answer was swift and categorical: "No. We all *hate* progressive rock music."

It is common to read about some band that worked in obscurity, only to be discovered decades later. In the case of progressive rock, the sequence has unfolded in reverse: these bands were once celebrated, and then people began to reconsider. The collapse of prog helped reaffirm the dominant narrative

of rock and roll: that pretension was the enemy; that virtuosity could be an impediment to honest self-expression; that “self-taught” was generally preferable to “classically trained.”

In the past twenty years, though, a number of critics and historians have argued that prog rock was more interesting and more thoughtful than the caricature would suggest. The latest is David Weigel, a savvy political reporter for the *Washington Post* who also happens to be an unabashed fan—or, more accurately, a semi-abashed fan. His new history of prog rock is called “The Show That Never Ends,” and it begins with its author embarking on a cruise for fans, starring some of the great prog-rock bands of yore, or what remains of them. “We are the most uncool people in Miami,” Weigel writes, “and we can hardly control our bliss.”

Almost no one hated progressive rock as much, or as memorably, as Lester Bangs, the dyspeptic critic who saw himself as a rock-and-roll warrior, doing battle against the forces of fussiness and phoniness. In 1974, he took in an E.L.P. performance and came away appalled by the arsenal of instruments (including “two Arthurian-table-sized gongs” and “the world’s first synthesized drum kits”), by Emerson’s preening performance, and by the band’s apparent determination to smarten up rock and roll by borrowing from more respectable sources. E.L.P. had reached the Top Ten, in both Britain and America, with a live album based on its bombastic rendition of Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” Bangs wanted to believe that the band members thought of themselves as vandals, gleefully desecrating the classics. Instead, Carl Palmer, the drummer, told him, “We hope, if anything, we’re encouraging the kids to listen to music that has more quality”—and “quality” was precisely the quality that Bangs loathed. He reported that the members of E.L.P. were soulless sellouts, participating in “the insidious befoulment of

all that was gutter pure in rock.” Robert Christgau, the self-proclaimed “dean of American rock critics,” was, if anything, more dismissive: “These guys are as stupid as their most pretentious fans.”

The story of this reviled genre starts, though, with the most acclaimed popular music ever made. “If you don’t like progressive rock, blame it on the Beatles,” a philosophy professor named Bill Martin wrote, in his 1998 book, “Listening to the Future,” a wonderfully argumentative defense of the genre. Martin is, in his own estimation, “somewhat Marxist,” and he saw progressive rock as an “emancipatory and utopian” movement—not a betrayal of the six-

ties counterculture but an extension of it. Martin identified a musical “turning point” in 1966 and 1967, when the Beach Boys released “Pet Sounds” and the Beatles released “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” which together inspired a generation of bands to create albums that were more unified in theme but more diverse in sound. Using orchestration and studio trickery, these albums summoned the immersive pleasure of watching a movie, rather than the kinky thrill of listening to the radio.

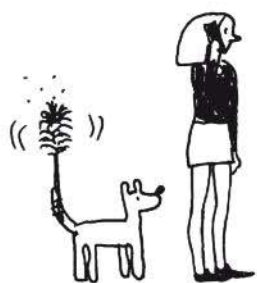
When bands set out to make hit albums, rather than hit singles, some of them abandoned short, sharp love songs and began to experiment with intricate compositions and mythopoetic lyrics. By the dawn of the seventies, the term “progressive rock” was being applied to a cohort of rock-and-roll groups that thought they might be outgrowing rock and roll. In 1973, Columbia Records released a double-album compilation called “The Progressives.” The liner notes informed listeners that “the boundaries between styles and categories continue to blur and disappear.”

But this inclusive musical movement was also, as Weigel emphasizes, a parochial one. “American and British youth music had grown together from the moment the Beatles landed at J.F.K.,” he writes. “In 1969, the two sounds finally started to grow apart.” Weigel quotes an interview with Lee

Jackson, the lead singer of a British rock band called the Nice—Keith Emerson’s previous band. “The basic policy of the group is that we’re a European group,” Jackson said. “We’re not American Negroes, so we can’t really improvise and feel the way they can.” (Ironically, the Nice’s biggest hit was an instrumental version of Leonard Bernstein’s “America.”) In a thoughtful 2009 autobiography, Bill Bruford, a drummer who was central to the development of prog rock, noted that many of the music’s pioneers were “nice middle-class English boys,” singing songs that were “self-consciously British.” Genesis, for instance, was formed at Charterhouse, a venerable boarding school in Surrey; the band’s album “Selling England by the Pound” was an arch and whimsical meditation on national identity. Bruford pointed out that even Pink Floyd, known for free-form jam sessions and, later, cosmic rock epics, found time to record songs like “Grantchester Meadows,” a gentle ode to the East Anglian countryside.

In 1969, King Crimson, the most rigorous and avant-garde of the major prog bands, released what is now considered the genre’s first great album, a strange and menacing debut called “In the Court of the Crimson King.” The album used precise dissonance and off-kilter rhythms to evoke in listeners a thrilling sensation of ignorance: you got the feeling that the musicians understood something you didn’t. At a career-making concert in Hyde Park, opening for the Rolling Stones, King Crimson played a ferocious set that ended with an acknowledgment of England’s musical heritage: a rendition of “Mars, the Bringer of War,” by the English composer Gustav Holst.

From the start, King Crimson was the kind of band that musicians love—as opposed, that is, to the kind of band that non-musicians love. (King Crimson never had a hit single, although “21st Century Schizoid Man,” the first song from its first album, served, in 2010, as the basis for “Power,” by Kanye West.) Bill Bruford, the drummer, was astonished by an early King Crimson performance, and resolved to make equally ambitious music with his own





band, a sweetly melodic group called Yes. In its own way, Yes, too, was profoundly English—Jon Anderson, the lead singer, generally eschewed faux-American bluesiness, and the band instead deployed pleasing multipart harmonies that recall the choral tradition of the Anglican Church.

In 1971, Yes released an album called “Fragile,” which included a hummable—and very progressive—song called “Roundabout.” On the album, it lasted more than eight minutes, but unsentimental record executives trimmed it to three and a half, and the edited version found a home on U.S. radio stations. This music, so self-consciously English, sounded different in America, where its rather nerdy creators were greeted as exotic rock stars. That summer, Yes played its first U.S. concert, at an arena in Seattle. A fan who approached Jon Anderson before the show remembered that Anderson was nervous. “I don’t know what is going to happen,” the singer told him. “I’ve never been in a place like this.”

When Anderson sang, “I’ll be the roundabout,” most American listeners surely had no idea that he was referring to the kind of intersection known less euphoniously, in the U.S., as a traffic circle. (The song was inspired by the view from a van window.) Why, then, did this music seduce so many Americans? In 1997, a musician and scholar named Edward Macan published “Rocking the Classics,” in which he offered a provocative explanation. Noting that this artsy music seemed to attract “a greater proportion of blue-collar listeners” in the U.S. than it had in Britain, he proposed that the genre’s Britishness “provided a kind of surrogate ethnic identity to its young white audience”: white music for white people, at a time of growing white anxiety. Bill Martin, the quasi-Marxist, found Macan’s argument “troubling.” In his view, the kids in the bleachers were revolutionaries, drawn to the music because its sensibility, based on “radical spiritual traditions,” offered an alternative to “Western politics, economics, religion, and culture.”

The genre’s primary appeal, though, was not spiritual but technical. The

musicians presented themselves as virtuosos, which made it easy for fans to feel like connoisseurs; this was avant-garde music that anyone could appreciate. (Pink Floyd might be the most popular prog-rock band of all time, but Martin argued that, because the members lacked sufficient “technical proficiency,” Pink Floyd was not really prog at all.) In some ways, E.L.P. was the quintessential prog band, dominated by Emerson’s ostentatious technique—he played as fast as he could, and sometimes, it seemed, faster—and given to grand, goofy gestures, like “Tarkus,” a twenty-minute suite that recounted the saga of a giant, weaponized armadillo. The members of E.L.P. betrayed no particular interest in songwriting; the group’s big hit, “Lucky Man,” was a fluke, based on something that Greg Lake wrote when he was twelve. It concluded with a wild electronic solo, played on a state-of-the-art Moog synthesizer, that Emerson considered embarrassingly primitive. An engineer had recorded Emerson warming up, and the rest of the band had to convince him not to replace his squiggles with something more precise—more impressive. In the

effortful world of prog, there was not much room for charming naïveté or happy accidents; improvised solos were generally less important than composed instrumental passages.

The audience for this stuff was largely male—Bruford writes ruefully that, throughout his career, women “generally and rather stubbornly stayed away” from his performances. The singer-songwriter John Wesley Harding, an obsessive prog-rock fan, suggests that these musicians were “afraid of women,” and that they expressed this fear by shunning love songs. What they provided, instead, was spectacle. As the American crowds got bigger, the stages did, too, which meant more elaborate shows, which in turn drew more fans. Weigel notes that, in one tour program, the members of Genesis promised to “continually feed profits back into the stage show.” (At one point, the show included a stage-wide array of screens displaying a sequence of hundreds of images, and, for the lead singer, a rubbery, tumorous costume with inflatable testicles.) Yes toured with sets designed by Roger Dean, the artist who painted its extraterrestrial album covers. Dean’s



*“Would you prefer me to hover over you silently or awkwardly try to make small talk?”*



*"You can't judge my parenting skills by what you see in the lobby."*

innovations included enormous, sac-like pods from which the musicians could dramatically emerge. Inevitably, one of the pods eventually malfunctioned, trapping a musician inside and prefiguring a famous scene from "This Is Spinal Tap." The competition among bands to create bigger and brighter spectacles was absurd but also irresistible, and quite possibly rational. American arena stages, like LPs, needed to be filled, and so these bands set out to fill them.

Weigel's book has an unlikely flaw, given its subject: it is too short. Wary, perhaps, of taxing readers' patience, he finishes his tour in three hundred pages, resisting what must have been an overwhelming urge to interrupt the narrative with discographical digressions. Martin, less diffident, included in his book a list of sixty-two "essential" progressive-rock albums—partly to provide a shopping list for newcomers, and partly, one suspects, because he liked the idea of outraging hard-core fans with his omissions.

So what is the greatest progressive-

rock album of all time? One perennial and deserving candidate is "Close to the Edge," by Yes, from 1972, which consists of three long songs that are, by turns, gently pastoral and gloriously futuristic, responding to the genre's contradictory impulses: to explore musical history and to leave it behind. Earlier this year, Will Romano published "Close to the Edge: How Yes's Masterpiece Defined Prog Rock," a frankly obsessive study that makes no pretense of levelheadedness. Romano notes that he listened to the album "easily over a thousand times" while working on the book, and, when he wonders about a "low pulse that pervades entire sections" of the title track, it seems possible that he has begun to hallucinate. He embarks upon a brave attempt to decode Anderson's inane lyrics, provides an astute technical description of the way Steve Howe seems to play lead and rhythm guitar at the same time, and identifies the pivotal moment when Rick Wakeman, the keyboard player, met Denise Gandrup, a designer of sparkly capes, which became his signature.

Romano ends with a note of defiance,

pointing out that Yes still hadn't been accepted by the cultural élitists in charge of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. This spring, not long after the book's publication, Yes was finally inducted—more than two decades after it became eligible. And yet Romano is right: there is something inspiring about the indigestibility of prog, which still hasn't quite been absorbed into the canon of critically beloved rock and roll, and which therefore retains some of its outsider appeal. Often, we celebrate bygone bands for being influential, hearing in them the seeds of the new; the best prog provides, instead, the shock of the old.

Listeners who wonder what they have been missing should probably ignore E.L.P. entirely and head straight for "Close to the Edge"—or, if they want something a bit more bruising, "Red," an austere album that a new version of King Crimson (including Bruford) released in 1974. One of the most underappreciated progressive-rock groups was Gentle Giant, but there was a reason for this neglect: none of the band members happened to be a great singer. So they used interlocking instrumental lines, shifting time signatures, and close harmonies to construct songs that seemed to occupy some phantom limb of music's evolutionary tree.

Gentle Giant was one of the bands featured on "The Progressives," the Columbia Records compilation, which turned out to have a hidden agenda: it was, in large part, a jazz album, seemingly designed to help prog fans develop a taste for Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus, and Mahavishnu Orchestra. Jazz played an important but disputed role in the story of progressive rock. While some British bands were trying to turn inward, away from American influences, others were finding ways to forge new ties between rock and jazz. Indeed, Mahavishnu Orchestra, a jazz-fusion group led by the English guitarist John McLaughlin (who previously played with Miles Davis), is sometimes considered an honorary prog band—at the time, the distinctions between these genres could be hazy. And in Canterbury, in the southeast of England, a cluster of interconnected bands created their



own jazz-inflected hybrids: Soft Machine, Matching Mole, Hatfield & the North. These are the bands most likely to charm—and perhaps convert—listeners who think that they hate progressive rock. Unlike the swash-bucklers who conquered arenas, the Canterburians were cheerfully unheroic, pairing adventurous playing with shrugging, self-deprecating lyrics about nothing much. (One Hatfield & the North song goes, “Thank all the mothers who made cups of tea./ If they didn’t care for us, we wouldn’t be/ here to sing our songs and entertain./ Plug us in and turn on the mains!”) This is music animated by a spirit of playful exploration—recognizably progressive, you might say, though not terribly prog.

The question of progress bedeviled many of the prog bands: the ethos, which implied constant transformation, was at odds with the sound, which was identifiable, and therefore stuck. Robert Fripp solved this problem by disbanding King Crimson just as “Red” was being released. “The band ceased to exist in 1974, which was when all English bands in that genre should have ceased to exist,” he said later. Once some album-side-long songs had been recorded, and some snippets of classical music appropriated, it was not obvious how further progress might be made, especially since the bands now had big crowds to please. In 1978, E.L.P. released an infamous album called “Love Beach,” which was recorded in the Bahamas, and whose cover depicted something less enticing than a battle-ready armadillo: the three grinning band members, displaying white teeth and varying amounts of chest hair.

Progressive rock was a stubborn genre, and yet a number of its adepts proved to be surprisingly flexible; it turned out that their considerable musical skill could be put to new uses. In 1980, Steve Howe, the guitarist from Yes, told the *Los Angeles Times* that his band had been “modernized” and simplified. “Whatever’s been leveled at us in the past, we want to be re-judged,” he said. This kind of desperate ploy isn’t supposed to work, but it did: in 1983, Yes topped the

American pop chart with “Owner of a Lonely Heart,” which barely sounded like it had come from the same band. A new group called Asia, made up of refugees from Yes, King Crimson, and E.L.P., released an album that reached No. 1 on the American chart. Genesis did something even more impressive, transforming into a Top Forty band while spawning three successful solo careers. The singer, Peter Dinklage, became a pop star, and so did the drummer, Phil Collins, and the bassist, Mike Rutherford, who led Mike + the Mechanics. For a few of the genre’s biggest stars, the music industry offered an attractive bargain: leave prog behind and you can be bigger than ever.

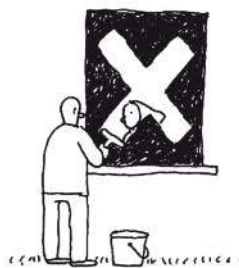
Some true believers remained, of course. In the seventies, prog-inspired American bands like Kansas and Styx had conquered arenas, and by the end of the decade there was Rush, a Yes-obsessed trio of Canadians who received even worse reviews than their British forebears. One reason was their avowed love of Ayn Rand; an influential and absurd review in *New Musical Express*, a British magazine, accused them of preaching “proto-fascism.” Another reason was that, by the late seventies, progressive rock was about the most unhip music in existence. “The fans showing up to hear Rush were the wrong kind of fans—the mockable ones, with mockable taste in music,” Weigel writes, holding up this judgment for ridicule without quite dissenting from it. (No doubt he was sorely tempted to use the term “deplorables.”) By the time Rush emerged, progressive rock had entered its never-ending defensive phase; uncoolness is now part of the genre’s identity, and even a devoted fan like Weigel may not be entirely sure whether he wants that to change.

Progressive rock, broadly defined, can never disappear, because there will always be musicians who want to experiment with long songs, big concepts, complex structures, and fantastical lyrics. You can hear a trace of the genre in the fearless compositions of

Joanna Newsom or, equally, in “Pyramids,” an epic Frank Ocean slow jam that blends Afrocentric mythology with a narrative about sex work. At Coachella this year, one of the breakout stars was Hans Zimmer, the German composer, who performed excerpts from his film scores with an orchestra and a rock band. (Anyone who cheered him on has forever lost the right to make snarky jokes about bands like Yes.) Plenty of revivalist bands play what might, paradoxically, be called retro-prog. And there have been latter-day innovators. Tool emerged, a quarter century ago, as an awesome new kind of prog band: precise but unrelentingly heavy, all rumbles and hums. In Sweden, Meshuggah, in the nineties, built roaring, ferocious songs atop fiendish riffs in prime-number time signatures; Opeth, in the aughts, found a connection between death-metal fury and Pink Floydian reverie.

What can disappear—what long ago disappeared, in fact, at least among rock bands—is the ideology of progress in pop music: the optimistic sense, shared by all those early-seventies pioneers, that the form was evolving and improving, and that prog rock offered a sneak peek at our future. The bands thought that the arc of the musical universe bent toward keyboard solos. This is part of what drove Lester Bangs crazy—he couldn’t understand why these musicians thought they had improved upon old-fashioned rock and roll. But contemporary listeners might find the genre’s optimistic spirit more exotic, and therefore more endearing, than it once seemed. Of course, prog rock was not the future—at least, not more than anything else was.

Nowadays, it seems clear that rock history is not linear but cyclical. There is no grand evolution, just an endless process of rediscovery and reappraisal, as various styles and poses go in and out of fashion. We no longer, many of us, believe in the idea of musical progress. All the more reason, perhaps, to savor the music of those who did. ♦



DANCING

# SPUN SUGAR

*Alexei Ratmansky serves up Richard Strauss's "Whipped Cream" at A.B.T.*

BY JOAN ACOCELLA



In 1992, when the Russian-born choreographer Alexei Ratmansky, now the artist-in-residence at American Ballet Theatre, travelled with his wife, Tatiana, from Kiev to Winnipeg to join the ballet company there, they were dazzled by the aisles and aisles of food in the supermarkets. "At the time, food was scarce in the Ukraine, you could buy nothing, and suddenly there was all this stuff," he recently told Roslyn Sulcas, of the *Times*. "Tatiana loves whipped cream and would run to the stores to buy those cans you can squirt." Soon afterward, on a trip to Japan, Ratmansky came across a CD of a Richard Strauss ballet he'd never heard of, "Schlagobers"—or, in English, "Whipped Cream." He brought the music back to Winnipeg and, for a choreography workshop, fashioned from it a tribute to his wife: a short ballet in which he was a pile

of whipped cream and she was a little boy, eating it with a spoon. This seems to have been a pleasurable experience for him, and he had the idea of creating a full-evening ballet to Strauss's score. Two decades later, he has done so. His two-act "Whipped Cream" was given its New York premiere by A.B.T. late last month.

In view of Richard Strauss's fame, it is surprising that the "Whipped Cream" score was largely unknown when Ratmansky stumbled on it, but the ballet's original production, in 1924, was a flop. When Strauss became a co-director of the Vienna State Opera, five years earlier, that once great city was in a bad way. Austria-Hungary had lost the First World War—indeed, the empire had collapsed. Between inflation and unemployment, most of the Viennese were very poor; strikes and

demonstrations were daily occurrences.

Strauss, in his words, wanted to lift the spirits of the Viennese, so he gave them a sweet ballet with the following plot. A boy, after his first Holy Communion, is taken to a sumptuous pastry shop to celebrate. There he eats too much whipped cream, and a stretcher crew arrives to take him to the hospital. Once the human beings have left, the sweets come to life. Sugarplums, gingerbread men, and marzipan figures troop in and perform military exercises. Princess Tea Flower and Prince Coffee emerge from their respective cannisters and flirt with each other. National dances—polkas, Ländler, round dances—are performed by all. Eventually, a chef with a huge head arrives and engulfs the stage in whipped cream. All else disappears, and a battalion of whipped-creamlets, I guess you could call them, come in and do a *ballet blanc*, like the swans in "Swan Lake." Act II continues in the same vein. We've arrived at the hospital now, so the atmosphere is gloomier, but once again we get dancing delicacies, hydrocephalic authority figures, and, by the end, general hilarity. The boy doesn't even have to go home when it's over. He gets a golden crown and a good-looking girl named Princess Praline, and the curtain comes down.

To devise the steps, Strauss brought in a German choreographer, Heinrich Kröller, a classical-ballet master with a taste for spectacle. (He used *fifty* dancers for the whipped-cream ensemble.) Strauss also ordered up an array of sets and costumes that, in a time of stingy budgets, cost two billion kronen—ten times the price of a new production of Wagner's "Rienzi" opening that year at the State Opera. Finally, Strauss, in his music, dunked the whole thing in gold: big orchestrations, big dynamics, big everything.

And most people thought it was stupid. Wayne Heisler, Jr., in his 2000 book "The Ballet Collaborations of Richard Strauss," cites critic after critic dismissing the work as vacuous kitsch. Karl Kraus called it "pure idiocy."

So why wasn't Ratmansky deterred? Well, he is not a man to let a little idiocy stand in his way. He has spent many years, both in the West and in Russia, repairing and remounting Stalinist-era ballets featuring such things as heroic tractor drivers and dogs on bikes. At

*Strauss's lavish ballet was a flop when it was first produced, in 1924.*



the same time, he is blessed with a wonderful, light, sometimes goofy sense of humor. A fine example of this is the drunk routine performed in Act II of "Whipped Cream," in which men representing vodka and slivovitz fight over a woman representing Chartreuse. This being "Whipped Cream," there is another drunk routine in the same act, involving the boy's doctor and twelve nurses with hypodermics the size of Kalashnikovs. The doctor, trying to get offstage, bangs into the wing.

The gags are not as good as the choreography, though. Ratmansky is famous for the lovely complications of his dances: the not quite unisons, not quite symmetries, the steps occurring not quite on the beat. In the pas de deux for Princess Tea Flower and Prince Coffee, he outdoes himself. Coffee's entourage consists of three dancers, Tea Flower's of four. Does Ratmansky get rid of the extra girl so that everyone can have a partner and things can look tidy? He does not. He keeps her, to thread her way among the others or to start up a little something on the side—thus giving texture to what's going on in the middle—or just to lie down and look bored, whereupon all the men forsake their partners and run to her. I saw this dance twice. (The primo cast starred Isabella Boylston and Alban Lendorf.) I think if I had seen it twenty more times I would have discovered in it twenty more beauties. Not since the death of Balanchine has anyone made a ballet routine so inventive. It lasts maybe ten minutes and just keeps pouring out new episodes, new conceits, new ideas about this music and these charming, silly people.

If the Viennese critics thought Strauss's ballet was kitsch, they should have seen it with the A.B.T. designs. For these, Ratmansky chose the painter Mark Ryden, whose work he discovered in a coffee-table book at an airport bookshop. Described in the press as a "pop surrealist," Ryden is a Jeff Koons type, with a touch of Margaret Keane ("Big Eyes") and maybe a soupçon of the "outsider artist" Henry Darger, minus the sadism. Ryden has peopled Ratmansky's stage with furry animals that look like fairground prizes, a gum-ball lady resembling a blastula, and various creatures that slither on the floor and wag their ears. They are both appealing and appalling. The same goes for the sets. When the cook comes in and lets loose

with the whipped cream, the backdrop seems to depict a magnificent storm, but don't look up at the flies, because there the whipped-cream swirls look very much like a bucket of worms.

It would take a lot more than arresting design, however, to turn "Whipped Cream" into a first-rate ballet. What the makers were probably hoping for was a "spring 'Nutcracker'"—that is, a ballet, like New York City Ballet's "Midsummer Night's Dream," that people would take the kids to spring after spring. But to get repeaters, particularly children, a ballet has to have at least some dramatic force. "Whipped Cream" doesn't, and it's also very repetitive. When the drunken doctor appears for the third time, you want to say, "Him again?"

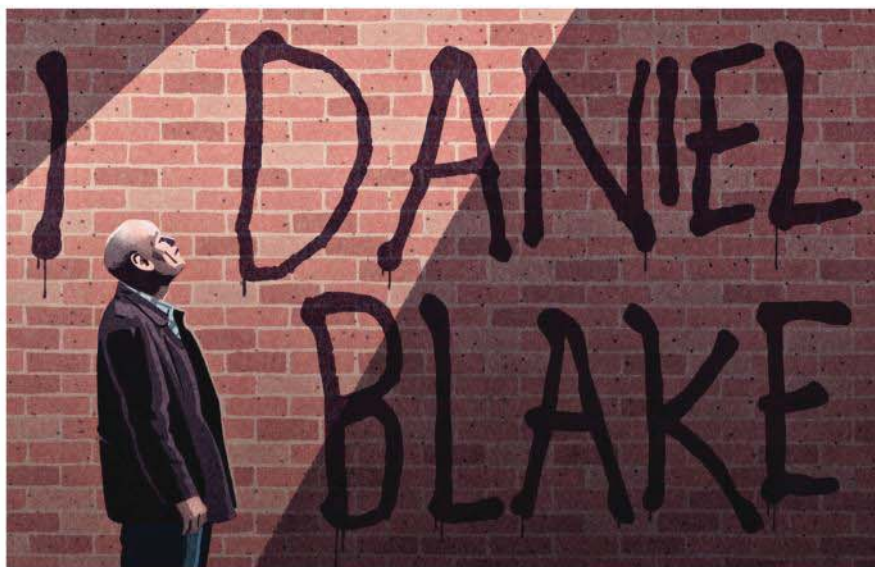
Ratmansky is a serious ballet scholar. Two years ago, for A.B.T., he mounted a whole four-act "Sleeping Beauty" on the basis of a 1903-05 notation score in the Harvard Theatre Collection, which it took him and his wife a month to decode. He is also suggestible; he loves a lot of things. These qualities, to me, explain why he would take the time to produce "Whipped Cream." How could I not?, he must have thought.

I will make a suggestion as to how he might not. It has just been announced that Ratmansky's next big project is to go back into the Harvard Theatre Collection and come up with a reconstruction of "Les Millions d'Arlequin," an evening-long piece created by Marius Petipa in St. Petersburg in 1900. As it happens, Balanchine, who had danced in this ballet in Russia as a boy, also revisited it. But he didn't reproduce the original steps—Who remembers them?, he said. Instead, he reimagined Petipa's creation as a new piece, "Harlequinade," with at least two marvellous roles. I have faith that the steps he created out of his *idea* of the old ones are as interesting as the original, and better suited to modern audiences and dancers. The same approach would benefit Ratmansky. The archives are filled with notations and partial notations of ballets that were put together a century ago, two centuries ago, by people with too much time on their hands and too much money in the royal coffers. But Ratmansky is a great choreographer, one who can make thrilling modern ballets to modern music. That being the case, can't someone else go sit in the archives? ♦

## HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

*"I, Daniel Blake" and "Beatriz at Dinner."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

*Ken Loach's films consistently pit decent individuals against malign systems.*

It is more than a year since Ken Loach's *"I, Daniel Blake"* was awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. The movie was briefly shown before Christmas, in New York and Los Angeles, in a fruitless bid for an Oscar nomination. Only now is this fuming work, about the quest for dignity in the north-east of England, being granted a wide release, and the timing is auspicious. Loach is the most enduringly political of filmmakers, and the United Kingdom has just been dragged through its second general election in three years, with issues of social justice much to the fore.

The title of the film has a touch of rhetorical resonance. You can picture the words *"I, Daniel Blake"* being proclaimed to a swelling throng or inscribed in a last will and testament, and, indeed, we see them being scrawled on a wall with a can of spray paint. Yet the drama could not be more downbeat. The hero, Dan (Dave Johns), is a middle-aged widower, deft with his hands, who lives in Newcastle. He has recently suffered a heart attack and, though keen to resume his job as a carpenter, is not yet well enough to work, though he is

deemed well enough to be ineligible for welfare benefits while he waits. We know this because, during the opening credits, we hear Dan being quizzed about his physical capacities, with such questions as "Can you raise either arm to the top of your head as if you were putting on a hat?" When he, in turn, asks the interviewer whether she is medically qualified, the conversation goes as follows:

"I'm a health-care professional appointed by the Department of Work and Pensions to carry out assessments for Employment and Support Allowance."

"But there's a bloke out in the waiting room, he says that you work for an American company."

"Our company's been appointed by the government."

That is purest Loach. Already, after a few seconds, he is casting his lure and drawing us into his point of view. Notice that the screen is black, and that the questioner is nothing but a disembodied voice; notice the robotic rote of her phrasing, and Dan's scornful talk of "an American company"—the outside force, brought to bear upon his native land. For Loach, as for Chaplin, the

basic format, recurring from film to film, is that of the decent individual pitted against the system and gradually compressed by its machinations. The possibility that the female interrogator, too, could feel like a worn-out cog in that system and might simply be trying to earn a living, like Dan, is not explored. The progress of his plight is all that matters.

The plot is laid out like an obstacle course. Dan, who plans to appeal against the decision that denied him welfare, is passed from one department to another, hampered by exasperating phone calls and bad-tempered confrontations. He befriends a single mother, Katie (Hayley Squires), who has moved up north from London, having spent a couple of years living in a hostel, sharing one room with her two children. Now she can't afford to pay for electricity, so her apartment is unheated. This bleak accumulation of details may sound excessive, but Loach is only just beginning. We get somebody lining up for free handouts of food, opening a can of beans, and clawing at the contents with bare hands; a humiliating encounter in a brothel; a child whispering, "My shoes fell apart"; a protest and an arrest; and a final declaration of principles. These include: "I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user," and "I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief." To sum up, "I am a man, not a dog. As such, I demand my rights."

The echo here is of David Lynch's *"The Elephant Man"* (1980)—"I am not an animal. I am a human being. I am a man"—and the new film is designed to foster an impression that the Victorian age has returned with a vengeance. The emotional wallop grows more zealous with almost every sequence, and Loach's refusal to go easy on us is as stubborn as it was when he made *"Cathy Come Home,"* a television play about homelessness that was watched by twelve million people when it was first screened by the BBC, more than half a century ago, and that led to the foundation of a charity.

The curious thing is that, despite the fury with which *"I, Daniel Blake"* charts the saga of Dan's hounding by the state, Loach himself believes profoundly in the value of the state as a provider of



benefits and as a bulwark against inequality. In 2013, he directed a nostalgic documentary, “The Spirit of ’45,” about the expansion of welfare commitments under the postwar Labour administration, and what he views as their subsequent erosion, and you could argue that his real beef, in the latest movie, is not with government—when Dan had his heart attack, for instance, he would have received free treatment on the National Health Service—but with the complex and unwieldy apparatus of government, referred to by Dan as a “monumental farce.” If Loach were to turn his attention to health-care provision in the United States, heaven knows what kind of film would result. It would probably burst into flames.

Only a brave person would say this to Loach’s face, but “I, Daniel Blake” is in fact a conservative movie. Politically, of course, it cleaves to the left, yet by temperament it shrinks from progress. Ruskin would have liked it. Dan, with his pre-industrial skills, makes a bookshelf for Katie and wooden toys for her kids. “Listen, you know, if you give me a plot of land I can build you a house, but I’ve never been anywhere near a computer,” he says, and, when told to complete a form online, he waves the mouse vaguely at the screen. (“Cursor? Fuckin’ apt name for it.”) He scoffs at the sneakers that his neighbor imports from China and sells at a profit. In short, modernity leaves Dan baffled, and my suspicion is that, like his creator, he would prefer to be alive in the sunlit uplands of 1945, and also that, as a white working-class Englishman without a job, he might well have voted for Brexit—as every area of northeastern England did, in 2016, apart

from Newcastle, which voted to remain in the European Union by a margin of one per cent. Should Ken Loach have dared to broach that awkward subject? One thing’s for sure: it would have won him no prizes at Cannes.

**D**o you live in or around Los Angeles? Are you pained in body, vexed in mind, or simply a bit tense around the shoulder blades? If so, all you need is Beatriz (Salma Hayek). Beatriz is a healer. She drives a grumpy old Volkswagen with Buddhist and Christian figures dangling from the rearview mirror. She keeps two pet goats at her home, in Altadena, or she did until one of them was strangled by a neighbor. (I’d like to hear the neighbor’s side of the argument.) And she ministers to patients at a cancer center. At once forthright and tranquil, Beatriz is not just a good woman; she represents goodness in action, something that less limpid souls find discomfiting. I mean, imagine if she were stuck in a room full of snotty white powermonsters. How would *that* turn out?

Welcome to “Beatriz at Dinner,” or, as I prefer to call it, “The Thumpingly Obvious Set-Up.” One afternoon, Beatriz visits a mansion overlooking the sea, where she kneads and oils the stressed-out muscles of Kathy (Connie Britton), who’s had a super-tough day getting ready for a meal prepared by her cook. Kathy and her husband, Grant (David Warshofsky), are indebted to Beatriz, because she soothed their daughter in the wake of chemotherapy. What could be more natural, then, when Beatriz’s car won’t start, than to suggest that she stay for dinner? Honestly, it’s

just a casual affair for a few friends—lovable sorts who order a “splash of cran” with their Grey Goose. The guest of honor is a real-estate magnate named Doug (John Lithgow), who spies Beatriz hovering at the edge of their gaggle and, assuming this plainly dressed Latina figure to be the help, asks her to refresh his drink. The stage is set.

“Beatriz at Dinner” is written by Mike White and directed by Miguel Arteta; this is their third movie together, after “Chuck & Buck” (2000) and “The Good Girl” (2002), in both of which they refined the torturous art of making an audience squirm. The same thing happens here, with a fiery face-off between Beatriz, who believes that the planet is dying, and Doug, who kills it afresh every time he builds a new hotel. What a sublimely ill-matched couple the actors make: Hayek is steady and foursquare, with unflattering bangs and a disconcerting gaze, while Lithgow, twice her height, is lanky, richly amusable, and pink of cheek. As written, his character—steak muncher, cigar puffer, and, yes, shooter of rhinos—is about as subtle as a capitalist boss in an Eisenstein movie. Yet something in him (how Lithgow achieves this I haven’t a clue) seems momentarily touched and troubled by the healer’s presence. Like Ken Loach, Arteta is clearly confident of preaching to the converted, and of whipping up indignation at those who mean us harm. Thanks to his leading players, however, the movie grows limber, ambiguous, and twice as interesting, and the sermon goes astray. ♦

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, June 18th. The finalists in the May 29th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 3rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ..... ”

### THE FINALISTS



*“There’s mutiny in the air. Also Vienna dark roast, but mainly mutiny.”*  
Abby Gessner, Roslindale, Mass.

*“Complain all you want, but I haven’t lost a bathroom key yet.”*  
Michael McCarthy, New Bedford, Mass.

*“Or you could just move the damn coffee maker.”*  
Anthony C. Musto, Hallandale Beach, Fla.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Mind if I jump in?”*  
Daniel Ballen, New York City